



MEXICO BURNING: DOES AMERICA STAND IDLY BY?

BY

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The undersigned certify that this thesis meets master's-level standards of research, argumentation, and expression.

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DISCLAIMER

The Conclusions and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author. They do not reflect the official position of the US Government, Department of Defense, the United States Air Force, or Air University.



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ABSTRACT

This thesis provides a historical background of the evolution of violence in Mexico's ongoing commercialist insurgency and presents a case study of PLAN COLOMBIA, analysis, several potential courses of action for US assistance, and policy recommendations. The author begins by exploring four key phases of Mexico's ongoing conflict and explains how escalation of violence has transformed what was once transnational criminal activity into an insurgency. He then provides a detailed overview of US policy toward Mexico. He examines the George W. Bush administration policy which saw a dramatic increase in focus and funding following the attacks of September 11th, 2001 before moving onto Obama administration policy which refocused resources to stemming problems on the US side of the border. He then delves into US organizational boundaries which insert inefficiency, fuel resource battles, and slow down the decision chain. He subsequently addresses the US policy of treating the insurgency in Mexico as a law enforcement issue and its implications. The author provides case study of US involvement in reestablishing rule of law in Colombia. It details how the narcotics trade funded the Colombian communist revolutionary group known as the FARC and how expanding violence eroded the Colombian government's legitimacy and control of territory. He discusses how PLAN COLOMBIA provided US training, advisors, intelligence, funding and equipment to reverse the tide of the insurgency. He explains how the situation in Mexico is similar to that of Colombia in the 1990s as well as where it is different. To conclude, the author provides criteria and metrics that should be met before Mexico is considered stabilized and outlines courses of action to help Mexico reestablish rule of law for US consideration. These include a return to the Merida Initiative, increased US intervention, and a discontinuation of US aid to Mexico. Finally, the author argues that the US should remove economic and military aid from Mexico until Mexican officials acknowledge the problem, correctly define the situation as an insurgency, begin to roll back the rampant corruption, and launch a campaign to retake its territory. The author contends that until the Mexican people are willing to do these things, US aid is enriching corrupt officials and providing the cartels access to US intelligence through corrupt Mexican military and law enforcement agents. The author advocates for redirecting this funding to counterdrug and demand reduction efforts within the US.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Your own safety is at stake when your neighbor's wall is ablaze. – Horace

America's neighbor has a serious problem. Over the past decade, Mexico has experienced an epidemic of corruption and violence linked directly to the narcotics trade. Drug cartels now attack military, police and government officials brazenly on a routine basis with ever more sophisticated and brutal tactics in order to operate their narcotics trade without government interference. Drug related violence is ripping the nation apart and is threatening the Mexican government's ability to provide basic services and rule of law in a growing number of regions. This security dilemma forces many Mexican citizens to cooperate with the cartels, flee their homes or, in a small number of cases, take up arms in an attempt to provide security that the Mexican state cannot. With the Mexican government unable to maintain control of large swaths of the country, drug cartels are now operating with impunity.¹ This has led to an increase in the amount of narcotics manufactured in Mexico and smuggled into the US.

Mexico's growing instability is being fueled by the US's voracious appetite for illegal drugs. According to the Strategic Studies Institute "due to US interdiction successes in the Caribbean, Mexico has now become the single most important way-station for cocaine and heroin produced in the Andes, and is itself a major producer of marijuana and methamphetamines. The permeability of the US-Mexican border allows for easy transit into the United States, and Mexico's share of the drug trade has grown steadily over the past 15 years. More than 90 percent of the cocaine and 70 percent of the methamphetamines and heroin

¹ Max G Manwaring, Army War College (U.S.), and Strategic Studies Institute, *A New Dynamic in the Western Hemisphere Security Environment the Mexican Zetas and Other Private Armies* ([Carlisle, Pa.]: Strategic Studies Institute, [U.S. Army War College, 2009), 1–2, <http://purl.access.gpo.gov/GPO/FDLP924>.

consumed in the United States now either originates or passes through Mexico. The total value of this trade is perhaps \$25 billion annually.”² The various cartels operating in Mexico have demonstrated that they are more than willing to fight each other, the Mexican government, or anyone else who attempts to interfere with their access to US markets and the profits that they entail.

Unchecked violence in Mexico is a terrible thing and the US is complicit in driving the demand and providing revenue that fuels the fighting. Still, some may ask, is acting to stabilize Mexico in the best interest of the US? Aside from the deep historic and cultural ties, the US and Mexico are inextricably linked by a border which is experiencing a dramatic increase in spillover violence on the American side.³ Mexico is America’s third largest trading partner with over \$500 billion in goods and services traded between the two nations in 2011.⁴ The US has invested over a trillion dollars since the 1980s to stem the flow of illegal drugs into the country in an attempt to protect the American people from themselves.⁵ The Chief of Operations for the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), Thomas Harrigan, in his testimony before the US House of Representatives said “more that 31,000 Americans—or approximately ten times the number of people killed by terrorists on 11 September 2001—die each year as a direct result of drug abuse.”⁶ Additionally, there is a growing body of research which indicates that transnational criminal organizations are cooperating with extremist groups either for profit, collaboration or simply convenience.⁷ Ungoverned spaces and failed

² Brands, Hal, “Mexico’s Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counterdrug Policy,” *Army War College, and Strategic Studies Institute*, 2009, 10.

³ Russell D Howard, Traugher, and Joint Special Operations University (U.S.), *The Nexus of Extremism and Trafficking: Scourge of the World or so Much Hype?*, 2013, 8.

⁴ “Mexico Trade Facts,” US Government, *Office of the United States Trade Representative, Executive Office of the President*, January 2, 2014, 1, <http://www.ustr.gov/countries-regions/americas/mexico>.

⁵ Peter Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade: Scope, Dimensions, Impact, and Response*, RAND Corporation Monograph Series (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2011), 47.

⁶ Howard and Joint Special Operations University (U.S.), *The Nexus of Extremism and Trafficking*, 39.

⁷ Howard and Joint Special Operations University (U.S.), *The Nexus of Extremism and Trafficking*, xi–3.

states provide criminal and terrorist organizations with free space to operate and “produce and export insecurity.”⁸ Cartels, as well as illegal immigrants, move back and forth across the porous US-Mexican border hundreds of times each day. The cartels have the means and the knowledge to smuggle bulk shipments of narcotics and people into the US. If motivated, for profit or for other reasons, cartels could easily ship weapons or terrorist cells into the US or take kidnapping victims back to Mexico for ransom or leverage. For these reasons, the author contends that it is critical to the security of the US to identify a counterinsurgency strategy that provides support to the Mexican government and allows the reestablishment of rule of law. Additionally, it is the author’s assertion that the US can accomplish these goals without the intervention of US military forces for combat operations in Mexico.

Defining the Problem

First, it is important to define why the violence in Mexico should be categorized as an insurgency and not extreme organized crime. Dr. James Kiras expands on Bard O’Neill’s comprehensive categorization of insurgencies to say that “some groups conduct irregular warfare to weaken the existing order and destroy it (anarchist), or profit from chaos (commercialist).”⁹ The goal of the cartels has never been to overthrow the Mexican government, but to weaken it to the point where they may operate free from government intrusion and maximize their profits. They do this in two ways, through bribing corrupt officials or through violent coercion.¹⁰ While both of these methods are also used by organized crime syndicates they are not used in a manner or to a degree which pushes the legitimate government out, thereby creating lawless or disputed territory. Dr. Kiras states “Insurgencies of this type may not

⁸ Howard and Joint Special Operations University (U.S.), *The Nexus of Extremism and Trafficking*, 44.

⁹ James Kiras, “Irregular Warfare,” in *Understanding Modern Warfare* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 231.

¹⁰ Manwaring, Army War College (U.S.), and Strategic Studies Institute, *A New Dynamic in the Western Hemisphere Security Environment the Mexican Zetas and Other Private Armies*, 17.

require the support of the general population, but rather the spreading of enough instability, uncertainty and fear to prevent the population from assisting the insurgents' adversaries. Insurgencies harness resources in order to conduct attacks using guerrilla tactics that are designed to inflict ever-increasing losses on government or occupying forces and tip the balance of forces in the insurgents' favor. Such tactics include hit-and-run raids, ambushes and, more recently, remote attacks using mortars, rocket launchers, and improvised explosive devices.”¹¹ All of these conditions exist in Mexico, which is why there are calls from members of the US Congress to declare “seven of the top Mexican cartels” foreign terrorist organizations.¹² It is the author’s assertion that Mexico is currently embroiled in a commercialist insurgency.

Methodology

If, in fact, Mexico is dealing with a commercialist insurgency, then the US should develop a strategy based upon successful counterinsurgency campaigns and not continue with piecemeal law enforcement operations. The vast majority of counterinsurgency literature insists that it is a long term venture that has more to do with building trust in the population, providing services and options than it does with simply killing the enemy. This is not to say that killing the enemy is not necessary, it is essential to provide a credible threat and to provide security for the population, it simply cannot be the only consideration. Fortunately, a model for this exists. For the last thirty years, the US has been conducting a similar counterinsurgency campaign in Colombia with, what many consider, a great deal of success and without a large commitment of US forces. The methodology for this thesis will be a comparative case study of PLAN COLOMBIA and current US support to Mexico. By examining US assistance to Colombia during its counterinsurgency campaign against the Revolutionary Armed Forces

¹¹ Kiras, “Irregular Warfare,” 235–236.

¹² Howard and Joint Special Operations University (U.S.), *The Nexus of Extremism and Trafficking*, 40.

of Colombia (FARC), I hope to glean some insight into possible US assistance or intervention strategies that may aid Mexican efforts to combat their growing commercialist insurgency.

Limitations

The limits of this study will be the employment of a single comparison case that will allow for an in depth look at PLAN COLOMBIA, but will also exclude other potentially relevant cases. This thesis will also focus primarily on the illicit narcotics trade and will only address briefly human trafficking and illegal arms smuggling, which are other areas deserving a more complete exploration by other researchers. Additionally, the research for this thesis was conducted at the unclassified level which may or may not portray accurately actual US policy and involvement in Mexico.

Overview

Chapter 2 is devoted to providing historical background of the evolution of the cartels and the changing nature of violence in Mexico's ongoing commercialist insurgency by exploring four key phases of the conflict. This chapter begins by explaining how Los Zetas militarized the drug trade, incorporating efficient, centralized command and control with decentralized execution. The second main point details how improved weapons, tactics and use of brutality as a form of psychological warfare have changed fundamentally the nature of the conflict. Escalation of violence and the targeting of political leaders, law enforcement and military personnel have transformed what was once transnational criminal activity, which is best addressed with a law enforcement solution, into an insurgency, which is effectively challenging the authority of the Mexican state in certain regions. The third phase sees Mexico take drastic steps in an attempt to bring down the cartels and reestablish rule of law. The last main point explores the spontaneous formation of village militias to provide local security in defiance of both the cartels and the Mexican government.

Chapter 3 will detail US policy toward Mexico concerning law enforcement and military cooperation, intelligence sharing, and financial aid. It will begin by detailing the George W. Bush administration's policy which saw a dramatic increase in focus and funding following the attacks of September 11th, 2001 and the formation of the Department of Homeland Security. The second major policy shift began with changes implemented by the Obama administration which refocused the concentration of resources to stemming the problem on the US side of the border. The third issue that will be addressed is the gaps in authorities that are structurally inefficient in dealing with transnational criminal organizations. Arbitrary organizational boundaries such as USSOUTHCOM and USNORTHCOM insert bureaucracy, resource battles and additional layers of coordination which tend to filter out information and slow down the decision chain. The final, main point addresses the US policy of treating the insurgency in Mexico as a law enforcement issue. While the problem clearly has a need for heavy law enforcement involvement, it is the contention of the author that it has escalated to the point where the military should be playing a much larger role.

Chapter 4 will focus on the case study of US involvement in reestablishing rule of law in Colombia. The chapter begins by detailing the how the narcotics trade funded the Colombian communist revolutionary group known as the FARC and how expanding violence eroded the Colombian government's legitimacy and control of territory. The second main point discusses how President Clinton launched PLAN COLOMBIA which provided US training, advisors, intelligence, funding and equipment to reverse the tide of the insurgency. In the third main point the author explains how the situation in Mexico is similar to that of Colombia in the 1990s. Finally, the author will point out where the situation in Mexico is different from that of Colombia.

Chapter 5 will provide analysis and conclusions that can be drawn from the preceding chapters. The author will provide some criteria and

metrics that should be met before Mexico is considered stabilized. Next, he will outline some courses of action the US should consider in order to help Mexico reestablish rule of law. Finally, the author will advocate for specific US policy changes and funding.



Chapter 2

Private Armies – Efficiency and Violence

**Democracy don't rule the world, you'd better get that in your head;
this world is ruled by violence, but I guess that's better left unsaid.
– Bob Dylan**

This chapter provides a historical background of the evolution of violence in Mexico's ongoing commercialist insurgency and how the formation of the cartel's paramilitary wings is threatening the stability of the Mexican state. It is critical to understand the basic timeline and scale of the problem facing the Mexican people in order to apply case study analysis and form conclusions or possible courses of action. The author begins by explaining how Los Zetas initiated the trend of militarizing the drug trade. He then details how improved weapons, tactics and brutality as a form of psychological warfare have changed the nature of the conflict. His third point explores Mexico's drastic steps that attempt to bring down the cartels and reestablish rule of law. Finally, the author explores the spontaneous formation of village militias to provide local security in defiance of both the cartels and the Mexican government.

By the mid-1990s US interdiction and counterdrug operations in South America and the Gulf of Mexico had forced the majority of the cocaine, heroin, marijuana and methamphetamines smuggled into the US to be produced in, or move up through Mexico. Dr Manwarring points out that "The flow of illegal narcotics through Mexico increased to the point such that drugs in Mexico are now estimated to produce \$25 billion (in US dollars) per year."¹ To put this amount of money in perspective, only the top three Fortune 500 companies—Exxon Mobil, Chevron, and Apple made more money in 2012.² With this amount of

¹ Manwarring, Army War College (U.S.), and Strategic Studies Institute, *A New Dynamic in the Western Hemisphere Security Environment the Mexican Zetas and Other Private Armies*, 17.

² "Top Companies: Most Profitable," Web, *CNN Money* (CNN, May 21, 2012), <http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune500/2012/performers/companies/profits/>.

money on the line and a never-ending demand for illicit drugs north of the border, multiple cartels formed to vie for their share of the market. Peter Chalk points out in a 2011 RAND study that “seven Mexican syndicates have remained at the forefront of the trade: the Gulf cartel, La Familia, Los Zetas, the Beltrán Leyva organization, the Sinaloa cartel, the Carrillo Fuentes syndicate (a.k.a. the Juarez cartel), and the Arellano Félix organization (AKA the Tijuana cartel). These groups can be divided into two main, competing blocs that essentially pitch the Sinaloa cartel, the Gulf cartel, and La Familia—which collectively formed the New Federation in February 2010—against a loose pattern of shifting alliances among the remaining five organizations.”³

The cartels have developed a reputation for ruthlessly defending their business from other cartels, law enforcement and, more recently, from local militias. Like any business, the cartels are interested in maximizing their profits and minimizing their costs; this means finding the most efficient and cheapest way to produce and ship their product while minimizing interruptions to the supply logistics and money laundering operations. In a dark form of humor, the Mexican drug cartels say that they are in the metals business and everyone does business with them. “The question was, ‘Silver or lead?’ Silver was a bribe; lead was a bullet to the head.”⁴ With police, judges and politicians bought off or intimidated, basic governance and rule of law have been eroded to a point where the cartels have become the de-facto law within their territory.⁵ Dr Manwarring goes so far as to question whether democracy in Mexico has been usurped by the money and violence of the cartels. He states “In contemporary Mexico, we observe important paradoxes in this concept of democracy. Elections are held on a regular basis, but leaders, candidates, and elected politicians are regularly

³ Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, xiii.

⁴ Manwarring, Army War College (U.S.), and Strategic Studies Institute, *A New Dynamic in the Western Hemisphere Security Environment the Mexican Zetas and Other Private Armies*, 17.

⁵ Brands, Hal, “Mexico’s Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counterdrug Policy,” 13–14.

assassinated; hundreds of government officials considered unacceptable to the armed non-state actors have been assassinated following their elections. Additionally, intimidation, direct threats, kidnapping, and the use of relatively minor violence on a person and/or his family play an important role prior to elections. As a corollary, although the media institutions are free from state censorship, journalists, academicians, and folk musicians who make their anti-narco-gang opinion known too publicly are systematically assassinated.”⁶ Finding themselves largely unchallenged, the cartels turned their attention to expanding their territory and market share by taking it from their rivals. It was in this context that the devilish creativity of the Gulf cartel would fundamentally change the way the narcotics business was done.

A New Breed

In the late 1990s the Gulf cartel began recruiting members of the Grupos Aeromóviles de Fuerzas (GAFES), a Mexican Airborne Special Forces unit.⁷ GAFES members who defected called themselves Los Zetas out of respect for their leader Arturo Guzmán Decena, whose radio code name when he was a high ranking Mexican Officer was “Z1”. Los Zetas or translated into English, “The Zs”, were the first of a new breed of militarized narcotics traffickers. Under Arturo Guzmán Decena’s leadership, Los Zetas became a powerful military wing of the Gulf cartel.

The success of the organization led the Gulf cartel to offer salaries which far exceeded anything the Mexican government was able to pay. This drove a rapid expansion of Los Zetas and a talent drain from the Mexican military and Federal Police forces. Their talents exceeded the Gulf cartel’s original expectation that they would provide more muscle. Dr Manwarring states “once the former soldiers were in place and functioning, their superior training, organization, equipment, experience,

⁶ Manwarring, Army War College (U.S.), and Strategic Studies Institute, *A New Dynamic in the Western Hemisphere Security Environment the Mexican Zetas and Other Private Armies*, 7.

⁷ Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, 26.

and discipline led them from simple protection missions to more challenging operations. The Zetas began to collect Gulf cartel debts, secure new drug trafficking routes at the expense of other cartels, discourage defections from other parts of the cartel organization, and track down and execute particularly ‘worrisome’ rival cartel and other gang leaders all over Mexico and Central America. Subsequently, the Zetas expanded their activities to kidnapping, arms trafficking, money laundering, and creating their own routes to and from the United States, as well as developing their own access to cocaine sources in South America.”⁸

Los Zetas military organization, logistics training and experience in covert operations allowed them to run smuggling operations much more efficiently. Use of advanced military tactics, heavy weapons and encrypted communications made them unmatched by any local police or rival cartels. “The Zetas have used the cell-phone signatures of their opponents to coordinate assassinations and kidnappings, and there are reports that they have penetrated the radio frequencies used by Mexican law enforcement. The group has been known to use the sort of swarming tactics favored by the powerful gangs that control the Brazilian favelas, and in other cases has put its military experience to use in more subtle ways. In 2007, Zetas disguised as soldiers infiltrated two police stations under the guise of a routine weapons inspection and murdered seven government officials.”⁹ Only the Mexican military can challenge them in an outright fight. However, due to military corruption, and Los Zetas’ deep military ties, the Zetas are most often forewarned of impending raids and simply vanish.

⁸ Manwaring, Army War College (U.S.), and Strategic Studies Institute, *A New Dynamic in the Western Hemisphere Security Environment the Mexican Zetas and Other Private Armies*, 18.

⁹ Brands, Hal, “Mexico’s Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counterdrug Policy,” 12.

Arms Race

An armed man will kill an unarmed man with monotonous regularity. – Clint Smith

The success of the Gulf cartels paramilitary wing, Los Zetas, was not lost on the other cartels. Soon all of the Gulf cartel's major competitors were moving to form quickly their own militarized units, some looking outside of Mexico for hired guns and technical specialists. A few have managed to hire former US Military personnel with experience in Iraq and Afghanistan and employed them with devastating success.¹⁰ "The Sinaloa Cartel formed an organization known as Los Pelones out of military deserters and turncoat police officers; Guzman now employs a similar group, the Fuerzas Especiales de Arturo (FEDA), composed of former security officials and gang members from Mexico and the United States. The gold standard for the paramilitaries remains Los Zetas."¹¹ With growing challengers and the loss of its leader Arturo Guzmán Decena who was gunned down by the Mexican Army in the border city of Matamoros, Tamaulipas on 21 November 2002, Los Zetas went through drastic changes. Now reportedly run by Heriberto "El Lazca" Lazcano and primarily operating out of Tamaulipas state,¹² Los Zetas has developed training camps to increase its numbers by recruiting from the general population all while attempting to maintain high quality.¹³ Dr Brands points out that "the combination of desperate poverty and cartel largesse provides a steady stream of recruits for these organizations. Young boys proclaim, 'I want to be a Zeta,' and recipients of the group's benevolence have said, 'We are all Zetas'."¹⁴ With recruiting and military grade training expanded to the general population, the threat of these cartel paramilitary wings has now gone well beyond anything that would

¹⁰ Deborah Hastings, "U.S. Soldiers Accepting Cash, Drugs for Mexican Drug Cartel Contract Hits," *New York Daily News*, September 13, 2013, 1.

¹¹ Brands, Hal, "Mexico's Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counterdrug Policy," 11–12.

¹² Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, 26.

¹³ Brands, Hal, "Mexico's Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counterdrug Policy," 12.

¹⁴ Brands, Hal, "Mexico's Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counterdrug Policy," 17.

normally be considered as simply organized crime. “Indeed, according to the U.S. Defense Department, the Sinaloa cartel, Gulf cartel, and Los Zetas can collectively field more than 100,000 foot soldiers, a number that rivals the size of Mexico’s standing army of 130,000 troops. Although not imminent, the possible breakdown of basic civility and law and order in Mexico, and its attendant implications for American security, continues to inform the threat perceptions of Washington.”¹⁵

Monopoly of Violence

One of the fundamental characteristics of a modern nation state is its legitimate monopoly on the use of force. Most organized criminal organizations utilize violence in some form or another but they rarely attempt to challenge the state’s security apparatus openly. Doing so would draw unwanted attention to the nefarious activities of the criminal organization which would be bad for business. While the cartels to date have shown no desire to offer a political alternative to the Mexican government, they have challenged the Mexican government’s ability to enforce rule of law, attacked military and law enforcement personnel and have begun providing some basic services to the population. The slowly mutating and escalatory nature of the violence in Mexico displays the characteristics of an insurgency that requires time to build experience, resources and sow fear in order to challenge the government. Dr Kiras of the USAF’s School of Advanced Air and Space Studies states “the key distinction between irregular and other forms of warfare, and different types of irregular warfare, rests on resources and the ability to translate them into effective capabilities. Groups conducting irregular warfare are attempting to defeat or overcome adversaries that possess significantly more powerful and numerous resources. Most often, sub-state groups are fighting against a state that not only possesses superior resources but also has a legitimate monopoly on violence within its borders. In

¹⁵ Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, 51.

order to have a reasonable chance of success in any type of irregular warfare, groups must keep their activities hidden from their adversary for as long as possible.”¹⁶

Challenging the State

Most insurgencies are resource constrained, especially since the end of the Cold War, which largely brought state sponsorship of insurgents to an end. The cartels in Mexico are flush with cash and are using it to rapidly expand their ability to militarily challenge the state in areas where it has not been able to buy cooperation. Dr Brands writes that “in carrying out these attacks, the Zetas and their competitors employ an astounding amount of firepower. The AK-47, long the stock tool of the Mexican drug trade, is now accompanied by an array of heavy weapons, including MP-5s, AR-15s, P90 submachine guns, grenade launchers, helicopters, improvised explosive devices, and 50-caliber machine guns. ‘You’re looking at the same firepower here on the border that our soldiers are facing in Iraq and Afghanistan,’ says Thomas Mangan of the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives.”¹⁷ With these types of weapons in the hands of ex-special forces soldiers and the ability to choose the time and place of their attacks, the paramilitary wings of the cartels have little to fear from law enforcement and have grown increasingly brazen in their challenges to the state’s authority.

Since 2006, these groups have increasingly turned their fire on the authorities. The cartels have reacted viciously to the Calderón government’s anti-drug campaign, responding to arrests and drug seizures by launching a sustained, bloody war against those that seek to disrupt their activities. Ambushes of police convoys and well-coordinated attacks against isolated government outposts in the northern part of the country have become frequent. The cartels regularly murder the officials in charge of designing and prosecuting government counternarcotics operations, including police

¹⁶ Kiras, “Irregular Warfare,” 231–232.

¹⁷ Brands, Hal, “Mexico’s Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counterdrug Policy,” 12.

chiefs in Nuevo Laredo and elsewhere and the head of Mexico's federal police. The anti-government violence has become so intense in recent months as to cause speculation that the two warring cartel alliances may have agreed to a truce so as to focus on fighting the government. Argues one observer, "We're seeing a transition from the gangsterism of traditional hitmen to paramilitary terrorism with guerrilla tactics." Cartel attacks are thus not meant solely to batter the police and the military, but also to sow fear and demonstrate that the cartels—not the government—are dominant in Mexico. Many drug-related killings are spectacularly violent, aimed at achieving the maximum psychological impact. In one instance, the Zetas stuffed four Nuevo Laredo police officers inside barrels of diesel fuel and burned them to death. Decapitations such as those occurring in Acapulco serve the same purpose. Cartel enforcers have begun to publish lists of officials to be targeted for assassination, post execution videos on YouTube, and coerce newspapers into providing graphic coverage of their deeds. 'They are openly defying the Mexican state,' says one analyst. 'They are showing that they can kill anybody at any time.'¹⁸

It is difficult to understand the psychological effects of violence which reaches into every facet of the lives of those living in the contested regions of Mexico. The carnage is no longer confined to inter-cartel wars and to law enforcement. Ordinary citizens who are thought to be helping rival cartels or law enforcement, as well as the families of military, law enforcement officers, judges, and elected officials are often targeted for reprisal or intimidation. For those charged with enforcing rule of law, expanding the nature of the threat to include their families drastically changes their decision making calculus. It is easy for Americans to apply mirror imaging of how crime is dealt with in the US to come to false assumptions about how to address the problems caused by systemic violence. Not since the Civil War have American military forces been concerned that their neighbors might harm their family while they are performing their jobs. Dr Kalyvas states "the acute feeling of

¹⁸ Brands, Hal, "Mexico's Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counterdrug Policy," 13.

vulnerability that combatants experience in the context of irregular war provides the third causal link between irregular warfare and barbarism. This link can be formulated in either a psychological version or a rationalist one. On the psychological front, the absence of clear front lines and the presence of the enemy behind one's back causes frustration, 'endemic' uncertainty, fear, anxiety, even panic."¹⁹

Ungoverned Space

What the cartels are fighting for is ungoverned space. Territory where they can expand their production, gain access to new smuggling routes, and recruit new workers without interference. The Mexican government has acknowledged the cartels power to control what happens in certain parts of the country. As Dr Manwarring points out "this violence and its perpetrators tend to create and consolidate semiautonomous enclaves (criminal free states) that develop into quasi states—and what the Mexican government calls 'Zones of Impunity.' Leaders of these quasi-state (non-state) political entities promulgate their own rule of law, negotiate alliances with traditional state and non-state actors, and conduct an insurgency-type war against various state and non-state adversaries."²⁰

To gain control of the territory the cartels like any insurgent force must control the population.²¹ Control and support of the population are often confused by both government and insurgent forces during a campaign.²² Government forces see the population's lack of cooperation as collusion with the enemy. Insurgents see any interaction with authorities as informant activity. Unfortunately, for the population caught in the middle and trying to survive, they often find themselves

¹⁹ Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 69.

²⁰ Manwarring, Army War College (U.S.), and Strategic Studies Institute, *A New Dynamic in the Western Hemisphere Security Environment the Mexican Zetas and Other Private Armies*, 2.

²¹ Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, 111–112.

²² Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, 113.

victims of the retribution of both sides.²³ Dr Kalyvas contends that, “Political actors maximize territorial control subject to the local military balance of power; territorial control in the context of irregular war requires the exclusive collaboration of individual civilians who, in turn, maximize various benefits subject to survival constraints...most people prefer to collaborate with the political actor that best guarantees their survival rather than defect by helping the rival actor. Collaboration is much more uncertain, however, in areas of fragmented sovereignty where both sides are present. Because of its value for consolidating control, here the premium on selective violence is particularly steep.”²⁴

Unfortunately for government forces the insurgent can easily undermine rule of law and confidence in the government’s ability to provide security to the populace.²⁵ Insurgents only need the population to stay neutral in the conflict in order to carry on their operations. If the population decides to support the efforts of the insurgent, then the insurgent’s job is easier. Dr Kiras provides some insight on the dilemma facing counterinsurgent forces. He states that, “Insurgencies of this type may not require the support of the general population, but rather the spreading of enough instability, uncertainty, and fear to prevent the population from assisting the insurgents’ adversaries. Noted theorists Thompson, Kitson, Galula, Trinquier, Valeriano, and Lansdale agree that the center of gravity for an insurgency is popular support, a fundamental difference between revolutions and insurgencies is how resources gained from the population or from other sources are utilized.”²⁶ Insurgencies harness resources in order to conduct attacks using guerrilla tactics that are designed to inflict ever-increasing losses on government or occupying forces and tip the balance of forces in the insurgents’ favor. Such tactics

²³ Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, 116.

²⁴ Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, 12.

²⁵ John Mackinlay, *Insurgent Archipelago*. ([S.l.]: Oxford University Press, 2012), 182–183.

²⁶ Kiras, “Irregular Warfare,” 263.

include hit-and-run raids, ambushes and, more recently, remote attacks using mortars, rocket launchers and improvised explosive devices.²⁷

Galula, when writing about the French counterinsurgency campaign, described the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) strategy of using a brief period of “blind terrorism”²⁸ or what Dr Kalyvas calls indiscriminate violence to sow fear in the general population that no one is safe.²⁹ The FLN followed this with a prolonged war of “selective terrorism” which aimed to make examples of those believed to be cooperating with French forces.³⁰ This campaign of selective terrorism served three purposes. The first was to eliminate actual French sympathizers. The second was to frighten the population and prevent any further cooperation with the French in a specific area in what Galula coined as the “battle for silence.”³¹ The third purpose was to allow for some guarantee of safety for the population based on their compliance which would lay the ground work for engendering true support from the population. Today, we see the Mexican cartels utilizing both indiscriminate violence as well as selective terrorism in order to maintain control of the local population. Dr Brands points out the “calling card of these groups is their brutality. Aiming to terrify their opponents and cow the population, organizations like FEDA and the Zetas use a variety of savage tactics. The Zetas are known to strangle, decapitate, and immolate their victims, often after torturing them for hours. Another group linked to the Gulf Cartel recently advertised its expertise in such practices by lobbing five severed heads onto the floor of a crowded nightclub in Uruapan. Decapitated heads are often found with notes

²⁷ Kiras, “Irregular Warfare,” 235-236.

²⁸ David Galula, *Pacification in Algeria, 1956-1958* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2006), 15.

²⁹ Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, 147.

³⁰ Galula, *Pacification in Algeria, 1956-1958*, 15.

³¹ Galula, *Pacification in Algeria, 1956-1958*, 15.

warning of the consequences of opposing the cartels. ‘See. Hear. Shut up. If you want to stay alive,’ read one.”³²

Mexico Fights Back

**Great danger lies in the notion that we can reason with evil.
– Doug Patton**

2006 saw a dramatic increase in violence as newly elected Mexican President Felipe Calderón began to act on his campaign promise to take on the cartels. President Calderón vowed that “There will be no truce and no quarter to the enemies of Mexico.”³³ He began by deploying some 12,000 federal police and 20,000 military personnel into the strongholds of the nation’s seven most powerful drug cartels.³⁴ These policies caused setbacks for the various cartels, but cartels have shown time and again that they are resilient and able to adapt rapidly. Brands states that “under Calderón, the government detained more than 14,000 suspects (including a number of high-profile targets) and seized large quantities of heroin, cocaine, marijuana, and methamphetamines. Massive police and troop deployments have temporarily tamped down violence in certain areas, and have somewhat weakened the cartels. Los Pelones have become less effective, and the Zetas have seen several of their leaders arrested or killed. Unfortunately, the positive effects of the government offensive have been transitory at best. The recent upsurge in violence indicates that these programs have not brought the cartels to heel.”³⁵ The arrests of four of Los Zetas key leaders in 2008 had severe consequences for the organization. “In particular were thought to have had a major impact: Mateo López (AKA Comandante Mateo), Efraín Teodoro Torres (AKA Z-14), Daniel Pérez Rojas (AKA El Cachetes), and Jaime González Duran (AKA El Hummer). The first three were all high-ranking members in the group’s overall leadership structure, while the

³² Brands, Hal, “Mexico’s Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counterdrug Policy,” 12.

³³ Brands, Hal, “Mexico’s Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counterdrug Policy,” 14.

³⁴ Brands, Hal, “Mexico’s Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counterdrug Policy,” 14.

³⁵ Brands, Hal, “Mexico’s Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counterdrug Policy,” 14–15.

fourth was responsible for coordinating and overseeing cocaine imports from Central America.”³⁶

Backlash

In response to the government offensive, the cartels unleashed their wrath by targeting government officials, police and military personnel. “Cartel enforcers have begun to publish lists of officials to be targeted for assassination, post execution videos on YouTube, and coerce newspapers into providing graphic coverage of their deeds.”³⁷ Cartels have begun using baited ambush tactics to draw government forces into kill zones. Gen Howard recounts the use of IEDs in Juarez, Mexico. He wrote that “responding to what they thought was an ‘officer down’ emergency call, a nearby policeman and paramedic worked frantically to save what they thought was another policeman’s life. Unfortunately, the ‘wounded officer down’ was a decoy who himself was killed with the responding police officer and paramedic when a nearby car bomb exploded.”³⁸ Unfortunately, the Mexican forces seem to be outmatched by the cartel paramilitary forces both tactically and in their ability to collect and exploit timely intelligence. “Coordination between Mexico’s two federal and more than 1,600 local and state police forces is weak and inconsistent, complicating efforts to mount large-scale operations. The Mexican police and military lack the manpower to remain in all drug hot-spots indefinitely, and in many cases, the cartels simply wait for the troops to depart before resuming operations. When the cartels do stand and fight, the results are often little better, as groups like the Zetas and FEDA are frequently better-armed and better trained than the authorities. ‘They are professionals,’ comments one analyst of the

³⁶ Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, 27.

³⁷ Brands, Hal, “Mexico’s Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counterdrug Policy,” 13.

³⁸ Howard and Joint Special Operations University (U.S.), *The Nexus of Extremism and Trafficking*, 9.

paramilitaries. 'The authorities don't have the resources to face up to a phenomenon like this'."³⁹

Systemic Weakness

Aside from the overt fighting between the government and cartels and cartels vs one another, there are other systemic issues hindering the Mexican government's efforts to regain control of the situation. Peter Chalk offers that "although President Calderón has decisively moved to dislodge the cartels' power base since taking office in 2006, several prominent organizations continue to exist largely due to pervasive corruption that has extended to the very highest echelons of the police and law enforcement bureaucracy."⁴⁰ The cartels now offer full benefits to include medical care for families of soldiers who defect from the Army.⁴¹ The Zetas are paying their low level paramilitary operatives \$3,000 a week compared to the \$1,100 a month offered by the army.⁴² Dr Brands supports Chalk's assertion that corruption is the key factor which hampers Mexican efforts to bring the drug related violence to an end. He states "an ability to blunt the antidrug offensive is also intimately tied to several deeper issues, ranging from widespread poverty, to the pervasive deficiencies of Mexican governance, to the persistent U.S. role in abetting the drug trade and the violence that attends it. Of these issues, official corruption looms as perhaps the most important. Corruption has long been endemic to Mexico, and among aspiring elites, a government post is still often seen more as a means of personal enrichment than as a vehicle for disinterested public service. This mindset is well-captured in the remarks of a PRI politician who, upon being elected to serve as a federal deputy, told the residents of his town—his nominal political base—to 'take a good look at my face because you are never going to see it again in this flyspecked, chicken-shit little

³⁹ Brands, Hal, "Mexico's Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counterdrug Policy," 15.

⁴⁰ Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, 25.

⁴¹ Brands, Hal, "Mexico's Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counterdrug Policy," 16.

⁴² Brands, Hal, "Mexico's Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counterdrug Policy," 16.

village.”⁴³ With statements like these it is easy to understand why rural villagers have little faith in the promises made by politicians in Mexico City or the forces they send into their communities on a random and short term basis. President Enrique Peña Nieto’s election in 2012 ushered in dramatic reductions in the government’s efforts to battle the drug cartels. With the government’s apparent abdication of its responsibility to protect its citizens and its ceding of territory to the cartels, a local phenomenon has begun to spread throughout rural areas that is now threatening both the cartels and the government.

Rise of the Militia

A man with a gun rules a hundred without one. – Vladimir Lenin

The FLN strategy used blind terrorism for a short period before switching to selective violence.⁴⁴ Unlike the FLN, the cartels have continued to use both forms of violence leaving local populations in a prolonged state of constant fear. Dr Kalyvas points out that “When violence is indiscriminate, compliance is almost as unsafe as non-compliance, because the ‘innocent’ can do little or nothing to escape punishment and the ‘guilty’ are no more (and sometimes less) threatened. If the rival political actor can provide credible protection against the violence, people will transfer their support.”⁴⁵ With the government unable to provide constant protection the people are left to face the brutality of the cartels on their own. Dr Kalyvas wrote “in the long run, military resources generally trump prewar political and social support in spawning control. However, the military resources that are necessary for the imposition of control are staggering and, hence, usually lacking. The rival actors are therefore left with little choice but to use violence as a means to shape collaboration.”⁴⁶

⁴³ Brands, Hal, “Mexico’s Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counterdrug Policy,” 15.

⁴⁴ Galula, *Pacification in Algeria, 1956-1958*, 15.

⁴⁵ Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, 171.

⁴⁶ Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, 12.

The cartel strategy of unrelenting and brutal terror against the local population has begun to backfire on the cartels. However, without the ability to turn to the Mexican government for assistance, many towns are beginning to spontaneously form local militias to provide security. Ioan Grillo says that the groups are “known as autodefensas or self-defense squads. The vigilantes first emerged in indigenous villages in Michoacan state in 2011. But in recent months, they have mushroomed to include thousands of combatants across Michoacan and neighboring Guerrero state, advancing into towns, villages and ranches, where they are shooting dead cartel operatives, destroying narco symbols and declaring the communities liberated.”⁴⁷

Pushed too far by the cartels, people began to realize that fighting back could not make them less safe than they already were. In an interview with Time Salvador Esquivel, a commander in the vigilantes defending Paracuaro said “They had our lives completely controlled. They knew about everything we did and we were always scared of being beaten or murdered.”⁴⁸ Grillo says that “last year, Esquivel’s own brother, a state legislator, was hacked to death by alleged Knights Templar bearing machetes. ‘This is a fight for justice, because the government has never given that to us,’ Esquivel says.”⁴⁹

Others have begun to resist the cartels for economic reasons, some cartels had progressed far beyond drug dealers to collecting taxes, controlling crop production and fixing pricing for goods and services. Grillo stated that “the meteoric rise of the vigilantes owes much to the way the Knights Templar preyed on the communities they controlled, extorting, kidnapping and raping. While still a major exporter of crystal meth to the United States, the Knights had diversified its crime portfolio, shaking down businesses large and small. In the “liberated” towns,

⁴⁷ Ioan Grillo, “Mexican Vigilantes Beat Back Ruthless Knights Templar Cartel,” *Time.Com*, January 29, 2014, 1, <http://world.time.com/2014/01/29/mexico-vigilantes-knights-templar-cartel-michoacan/>.

⁴⁸ Grillo, “Mexican Vigilantes Beat Back Ruthless Knights Templar Cartel,” 1.

⁴⁹ Grillo, “Mexican Vigilantes Beat Back Ruthless Knights Templar Cartel,” 1.

residents reveal how far the Knights dominated their lives. Farmers of avocados and limes had to pay a quota for every kilo they produced; corn growers were forced to sell their maize cheaply to the criminals, who sold it at double the price to tortilla makers; people who owed money had to hand their entire homes to the cartel, who brought notaries to sign over the titles. Those who stood against the gangsters risked being tortured, sometimes publicly, or decapitated.”⁵⁰

Initially armed with farm implements, single shot .22 caliber rifles and .410 gauge shotguns, normally used for hunting small game, success came slowly. Dr Kiras states “the quality and quantity of resources that a group enjoys have a significant bearing on the type of irregular warfare it can wage and the time it takes to achieve its objectives.”⁵¹ Despite these limitations, the movement has built momentum and outside support with each victory. New arms were acquired from deceased cartel members and word of militia successes began to spread from village to village and new recruits began to pour in. As one “vigilante leader explained that they are financed by donations from residents and businessmen, who prefer to support the vigilantes than pay protection to the cartel’s toughs.”⁵² Locals with intimate knowledge of who belongs in a village and who is an outsider have been able to capitalize on their superior intelligence, knowledge of the terrain and support of the populace to defeat much better equipped and trained cartel paramilitary units. Dr Manwarring says “what makes these small private armies so effective is the absence of anyone to turn to for help. Weak and/or corrupt state security institutions, as in Mexico, are notoriously unhelpful and tend to be a part of the problem—not the solution. In such a vacuum, only a few relatively well-armed and disciplined individuals are capable of establishing their own rule of

⁵⁰ Grillo, “Mexican Vigilantes Beat Back Ruthless Knights Templar Cartel,” 1.

⁵¹ Kiras, “Irregular Warfare,” 232.

⁵² Grillo, “Mexican Vigilantes Beat Back Ruthless Knights Templar Cartel,” 1.

law.”⁵³ US counterinsurgency efforts support the doctrine that rule of law requires that first, security must be provided for the population. One of the most effective means of protecting a population is by establishing a local security force. Major Gant wrote in his monograph on US Army Special Forces operations with tribal leaders in Afghanistan that “good governance is the follow-on to reliable security. Tribal Security Forces can facilitate both. As Justin Kelly said ‘Unless you are confident in the ability of your government to enforce its peace, then the man with a gun at your door at midnight is your master.’”⁵⁴

With the militia groups proving far more effective than either the Mexican police or military, public confidence in these institutions have fallen to an all-time low. Many public officials have called the militia activity illegal and called for them to be disarmed. This has led to cries of more corruption, that only a politician on the parole of the cartels would demand that the government forcibly strip citizens of their ability to defend their families. Grillo says “The administration of Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto has taken a mixed position on the vigilantes. Last year, federal police arrested dozens of militiamen in Michoacan, accusing them of working for the rival Jalisco New Generation Cartel. The vigilantes deny any cartel backing and have been lobbying for their companions’ release. On 14 January 2014, soldiers attempted to disarm some vigilantes in the town of Actunez, provoking a shooting that killed several people. Since then, soldiers and federal police have taken no action against the militias and in many areas roadblocks manned by vigilantes stand meters away from roadblocks manned by police.”⁵⁵

⁵³ Manwaring, Army War College (U.S.), and Strategic Studies Institute, *A New Dynamic in the Western Hemisphere Security Environment the Mexican Zetas and Other Private Armies*, 1.

⁵⁴ Jim Gant, “A Strategy for Success in Afghanistan: One Tribe at a Time” (Nine Sisters Imports, Inc., Los Angeles, California, 2009), 27, <http://blog.stevenpressfield.com>.

⁵⁵ Grillo, “Mexican Vigilantes Beat Back Ruthless Knights Templar Cartel,” 1.

On 27 January 2014, unable to defeat the cartels and unable to control the militias the Mexican government in an attempt to conceal its impotence “signed an agreement with one of the most prominent vigilante leaders to incorporate the militias into a Rural Defense Corps, under the command of the army.”⁵⁶ Dr Manwarring warns that “the evolution of new private, nonstate, nontraditional warmaking entities (the Zetas, and others) capable of challenging the stability, security, and effective sovereignty of the nation-state. Thus, we see the erosion of democracy and the erosion of the state. In these terms, the internal security situation in Mexico is well beyond a simple law enforcement problem. It is also a socio-political problem, and a national security issue with implications beyond Mexico’s borders.”⁵⁷ Leaders of several of the various militia have vowed that now that they have taken up arms, they will not simply lay down their weapons, go home and wait for another group of thugs to fill the power vacuum. This may be setting the stage for a show down between the Mexican military and an armed populace. Vladimir Lenin stated “A long time ago Engels, in the preface to the third edition of *Civil War in France*, wrote: ‘The workers were armed after every revolution; for this reason the disarming of the workers was the first commandment for the bourgeois at the helm of the state. Hence, after every revolution won by the workers, a new struggle ending with the defeat of the workers.’”⁵⁸

Analysis

The Mexican government finds itself dealing with crippling corruption, escalating and sadistic violence, and a population who no longer believes that their government can protect them. With the cartel’s private armies openly challenging government forces and a population

⁵⁶ Grillo, “Mexican Vigilantes Beat Back Ruthless Knights Templar Cartel,” 1.

⁵⁷ Manwarring, Army War College (U.S.), and Strategic Studies Institute, *A New Dynamic in the Western Hemisphere Security Environment the Mexican Zetas and Other Private Armies*, viii.

⁵⁸ Che Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, 3rd ed (Wilmington, Del: SR Books, 1997), 155.

taking up arms to establish independent local rule of law, the Mexican state has clearly lost the monopoly of violence.

This impacts the US in many ways that may not be readily apparent. First, instability drags down the Mexican economy which is linked to ours for better or worse. Investors are hesitant to start new ventures and tourists avoid visiting nations with uncontrolled violence.

Second, drugs are continuing to pour across the US border from Mexico. These drugs kill far more Americans annually than any terrorist attack has to date. The costs associated with drug abuse, long term health care, and law enforcement continue to bleed the US economy.

Third, ungoverned territory has proven time and again to be a breeding ground for extremist and criminal activity. We have seen this in Somalia and Afghanistan. Now it is on our border. The cartels have established links with human traffickers, arms smugglers, and terrorist organizations.⁵⁹ These nefarious organizations cooperate with one another for good reasons. Each one has something the other wants: the cartels have smuggling routes into the US and can easily bring weapons, or terrorists in if the price is right.

Fourth, we have seen limited spillover violence on the US side of the border but there is always the possibility of more if nothing is done to contain the growing violence in Mexico. The Bureau of Land Management has now closed many public lands in border states because they are deemed unsafe. Cities such as Albuquerque, New Mexico have seen a dramatic spike in kidnappings in recent years, but currently these can only be loosely tied to the drug trade.

Fifth, the lack of security and legal employment has the potential to expand the US's current problem with illegal immigration. Jordan and Turkey are currently dealing with hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing the Syrian civil war. If the violence in Mexico expands the US

⁵⁹ Howard and Joint Special Operations University (U.S.), *The Nexus of Extremism and Trafficking*, 21.

could experience a refugee crisis as people flee in search of safety and basic necessities.

As the strongest nation in the world and Mexico's northern neighbor, the US must take a strong stance to support its beleaguered partner or, at the very least, least take actions to prevent spillover problems from crossing into America. This may prove more easily said than done. As we have seen, the cartels have proven that they are shockingly resilient, creative, and well networked.



Chapter 3

US Policy and Reaction

A man is called selfish not for pursuing his own good but for neglecting his neighbor's. – Richard Whatley

This chapter details US policy toward Mexico concerning law enforcement and military cooperation, intelligence sharing, and financial aid. It highlights where US policy has been successful and where it has fallen short. It begins with the policies implemented during President George W. Bush's administration. Next, it looks at the changes in US policy toward Mexico under President Barak H. Obama's administration. The third issue addressed are gaps in authorities of various branches of the US government whose organizational divisions are both inefficient structurally and are not optimal for dealing with transnational criminal organizations. The final main point addresses the US policy of treating the insurgency in Mexico as a law enforcement issue and the limitations this has imposed on the solutions that can be brought to bear.

George W. Bush Administration Policy

Shortly into his presidency, George W. Bush found himself leading the US through an uncertain period of threats newly realized following the attacks of September 11th, 2001. President Bush had campaigned and won based on a largely domestic policy platform. The events of that day in September would change his focus dramatically toward foreign policy. With the President's State of the Union Address declaring a "Global War On Terrorism" and the Congress passing laws such as "The Patriot Act," the floodgates were opened, providing new funding, authorities, and organizations like the Department of Homeland Security. In this environment, drug smugglers were linked rapidly to terrorist groups via common financial networks. Michael Braun, former assistant administrator and chief of operations at the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) cites statistics "that 19 of the 43 officially designated foreign terrorist organizations have links to some aspect of

the global drug trade. He also believes that 60 percent of terror organizations are in some way connected with the illicit narcotics trade.”¹ It were these types of linkages, as well as testimony before the Congress, which led to a renewed emphasis to combat narcotics trafficking. However, the focus continued to be on Colombia.² From 2000-2007 US counternarcotics aid to Mexico averaged \$55 million annually.³ By late 2007 the stability of Mexico had deteriorated so severely that President Bush began to push for the Merida Initiative, which called for a sevenfold increase in US assistance.⁴ During the congressional hearings on the proposed legislation Representative Eliot Engel, head of the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, stated: “As long as there is demand for illegal narcotics in the United States, suppliers will sell their cocaine and heroin and other drugs on our streets, and as long as the narcotraffickers are armed with guns from the United States the brutal violence of the drug gangs will continue unabated...this is my concern with the Merida Initiative...we will spend more than \$1 billion on security assistance for Mexico and Central America over the next 2 years, but it is not clear that we are stepping up our efforts so we can cement the gains the Merida Initiative is designed to achieve abroad. The Mexican drug trade thrives on deeply embedded pathologies such as U.S. demand, cross-border gunrunning, poverty and corruption in Mexico, and the institutional deficiencies of the Mexican state.”⁵ Despite this opposition on June 30, 2008 the three year \$1.4 billion supplemental budget bill was passed by the Congress and signed by President Bush.⁶ All of this foreign aid was spent on military or law enforcement training and equipment, with 59 percent going to law enforcement and 41 percent

¹ Howard and Joint Special Operations University (U.S.), *The Nexus of Extremism and Trafficking*, 21.

² Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, xv–xvi.

³ Brands, Hal, “Mexico’s Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counterdrug Policy,” 18.

⁴ Brands, Hal, “Mexico’s Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counterdrug Policy,” 18.

⁵ Brands, Hal, “Mexico’s Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counterdrug Policy,” 26.

⁶ Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, xv–xvi.

going to the Mexican military.⁷ Despite promises to provide assistance to “Institution Building and Rule of Law” initiatives, no funding could be directly tied to these activities outside of general state security, antiterrorism, and border control.⁸ In a glaring oversight, the initiative failed to include assistance for anti-corruption efforts, strengthening of the justice system, or programs to stimulate legitimate economic growth. Dr Brands points out that “For its part, the Calderón government committed \$7 billion in counter narcotics funding over three years. Officials on both sides of the border have said that they envision the Merida Initiative as the first step in a long-term partnership between Washington and Mexico City.”⁹

Merida Initiative Postmortem

Despite the Bush administration’s cross border cooperation efforts, the situation in Mexico and in US border states deteriorated over the entire three year period.¹⁰ Dr Kan of the US Army War College contends that this increase in violence falls in line with what one should expect from initial efforts to contain a violent non-state actor. Dr Kan stated that “the pressure from both the US and Mexican governments has only heightened this atmosphere of uncertainty for cartels. When the agents of the government begin to challenge organizations that are operating in the marketplace or make some attempt at drastically reducing an organization’s power, cartels have an incentive to resort to increased violence in an effort to protect themselves and their livelihoods.”¹¹ His assessment is, however, in the minority dissenting opinion. Most of Dr Kan’s peers counter that the efforts were ineffective largely due to corruption and poor oversight, which led to funds being bled off at intervening levels or a lack of implementation due to ineptitude or

⁷ Brands, Hal, “Mexico’s Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counterdrug Policy,” 18.

⁸ Brands, Hal, “Mexico’s Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counterdrug Policy,” 18.

⁹ Brands, Hal, “Mexico’s Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counterdrug Policy,” 18.

¹⁰ Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, xvi.

¹¹ Paul R. Kan, “What We’re Getting Wrong About Mexico,” *Parameters* Summer 2011 (Summer 2011): 43–44.

malfeasance.¹² In addition to the corruption and oversight, the initiative was beset with structural flaws that helped lead to the program's failure. Dr Chalk points out that "the Merida Initiative, at least as currently formulated, neither addresses the gap between federal and local police forces nor provides assistance at the municipal level to deal with everyday security issues."¹³

Other critics of the Merida Initiative echo Representative Engel's opinion that the one sided approach to a two sided problem was destined to fail. Dr Brands states that "the Merida Initiative thus violates the inescapable mandate required of effective counternarcotics strategy: that while supply-side programs are politically popular and produce attractive statistics, unless they are paired with demand-side initiatives, they tend to produce few long-lasting gains."¹⁴

Barak H. Obama Administration Policy

The second major US policy shift regarding Mexico began with changes implemented by the Obama administration in response to the failures of the Merida Initiative. This refocused policy concentrated efforts and resources toward stemming the problem of demand for illegal narcotics and the supply of illegal weapons on the US side of the border. President Obama was elected on a platform which promised to disengage the US from messy overseas entanglements, work with international organizations to address foreign policy issues, and to make dramatic changes on domestic policy issues. Dr Chalk recounts that "during the 2008 presidential election campaign, Barack Obama specifically supported the Merida initiative as the logical basis for broadening the scope of cooperation between the United States and Mexico and

¹² Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, 65.

¹³ Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, xvi.

¹⁴ Brands, Hal, "Mexico's Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counterdrug Policy," 26.

providing stronger human rights protection than previous aid packages.”¹⁵

In an effort to reduce the cartels access to weapons, the Obama administration made changes to the tactics and policies of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (BATFE), more often referred to as the ATF. In an attempt to track and prosecute “straw purchasers” the ATF instituted special reporting instructions for dealers who sold more than one of any specifically listed weapons to an individual in a two week period. Straw purchasers are individuals who purchase firearms legally (often multiple weapons of the same type in a single transaction) in the US and then sell them, often at triple the price, in Mexico where they are illegal.¹⁶ This was the lead-in to the now infamous and badly botched Operation Fast and Furious (OFF). The premise of OFF was for gun dealers cooperating/complying with ATF agent’s instructions to allow knowingly straw purchasers to buy and walk out with firearms.¹⁷ Then ATF agents would track the straw buyers to the intended purchasers and then arrest both parties.¹⁸ Unfortunately, hundreds of weapons ended up in the hands of the cartel, many converted from semiautomatic to fully automatic, and with no arrests made.¹⁹ A firestorm of media and Congressional attention focused on the abject failure of OFF when a US Border Patrol Agent was ambushed and killed with weapons traced back to the program. In testimony before the House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, ranking member, Elijah Cummings entered for the record: “On December 15, 2010, Brian Terry, an Agent in an elite Customs and Border Protection tactical unit, was killed in a gunfight 18 miles from the

¹⁵ Brands, Hal, “Mexico’s Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counterdrug Policy,” 61.

¹⁶ *Operation Fast and Furious: Management Failures at the Department of Justice* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2012), 12, <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-112hhrg72915/pdf/CHRG-112hhrg72915.pdf>.

¹⁷ *Operation Fast and Furious: Management Failures at the Department of Justice*, 16–19.

¹⁸ *Operation Fast and Furious: Management Failures at the Department of Justice*, 18.

¹⁹ *Operation Fast and Furious: Management Failures at the Department of Justice*, 16–19.

Mexican border. Two AK-47 variant assault rifles found at the scene were traced back to purchases by one of the targets of an investigation called Operation Fast and Furious being conducted by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. When he purchased these weapons, the target had already been identified as a suspected straw purchaser involved with a large network of firearms traffickers illegally smuggling guns to deadly Mexican drug cartels. Despite knowing about hundreds of similar purchases over a year-long period, ATF interdicted only a small number of firearms and delayed making arrests.”²⁰

Unfortunately, the operation was launched based on false assumptions that the majority of the weapons used by the cartel were coming from the US. Subsequent investigations spawned by OFF’s failure have shown that numbers were intentionally manipulated in order to make a case for US domestic gun control legislation. In reality most of the cartels weapons were military grade weapons smuggled into Mexico from sources all over the world. Jeff Stewart a writer for STRATFOR’s Security Weekly continues:

Interestingly, the part of this argument pertaining to guns has been adopted by many politicians and government officials in the United States in recent years. It has now become quite common to hear U.S. officials confidently assert that 90 percent of the weapons used by the Mexican drug cartels come from the United States. However, a close examination of the dynamics of the cartel wars in Mexico—and of how the oft-echoed 90 percent number was reached—clearly demonstrates that the number is more political rhetoric than empirical fact...In fact, the 3,480 guns positively traced to the United States equals less than 12 percent of the total arms seized in Mexico in 2008 and less than 48 percent of all those submitted by the Mexican government to the ATF for tracing. This means that almost 90 percent of the guns seized in Mexico in 2008 were not traced back to the United States...The third category of weapons encountered in Mexico is military-grade ordnance not generally available for sale in the United States or

²⁰ *Operation Fast and Furious: Management Failures at the Department of Justice*, 9–10.

Mexico. This category includes hand grenades, 40 mm grenades, rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), automatic assault rifles and main battle rifles and light machine guns. This third type of weapon is fairly difficult and very expensive to obtain in the United States, especially in the large numbers in which the cartels are employing them. They are also dangerous to obtain in the United States due to heavy law enforcement scrutiny. Therefore, most of the military ordnance used by the Mexican cartels comes from other sources, such as the international arms market—increasingly from China via the same networks that furnish precursor chemicals for narcotics manufacturing—or from corrupt elements in the Mexican military or even deserters who take their weapons with them. Besides, items such as South Korean fragmentation grenades and RPG-7s, often used by the cartels, simply are not in the U.S. arsenal. This means that very few of the weapons in this category come from the United States.²¹

Unfortunately for the Obama administration, the Fast and Furious scandal and the use of questionable numbers with regards to weapons trafficking have garnered so much negative attention and congressional scrutiny that the successes of other policy decisions have been overshadowed. Dr Chalk points out that the Obama administration committed an additional \$331 million in aid.²² “The new assistance is more civilian-centric in nature and will be aimed principally at strengthening police and judicial institutions, rebuilding communities crippled by poverty and crime, and fostering more-effective intelligence exchanges. A portion of the money will also be used to underwrite experimental programs involving US and Mexican customs and immigration agencies working more closely to coordinate their patrols and deployments in a system of so-called mirrored enforcement. A pilot scheme has already been initiated along an 80-mile stretch of the Arizona/Nogales border and is currently proceeding in line with the

²¹ Scott Stewart, “Mexico’s Gun Supply and the 90 Percent Myth,” *STRATFOR - Security Weekly*, February 10, 2011, 1–2.

²² Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, 61.

military strategy of “gain, maintain and expand.”²³ Through cooperation, US law enforcement is able to train and pass on best practices to Mexican police, provide limited oversight of the utilization of US aid, and gains critical insight into the challenges facing Mexican law enforcement.

Despite these positive steps real concerns linger in Congress over the Fast and Furious scandal and the US strategy for assistance to Mexico. This has resulted in many programs being defunded by Congress. Dr Chalk states “the fact that, of the \$1.6 billion appropriated by Congress between 2008 and 2010, only 46 percent has been obligated and 9 percent actually disbursed. As a result, many of the programs listed under the aid package are not being fully or effectively implemented.”²⁴ Whatever the reason for the withholding of funds, it is doubtful that any initiative can be successful without funding. Dr Chalk contends the “prominent difficulty will be how to manage and ‘sell’ this assistance at a time when US-Mexico relations are being strained over the issue of border control and associated fears of a “flood” of illegal immigrants and narcotics-related violence being unleashed into the United States.”²⁵ Additionally, this split between the legislative and executive branches on US foreign policy sends mixed signals about America’s commitment to provide substantive assistance to the Mexican government.

Organizational Gaps

The third issue that has plagued US efforts to confront transnational criminal organizations (TCO) is organizational structures which are ill-suited to deal with current threat environment and gaps in authorities between law enforcement and military organizations. Arbitrary organizational boundaries such as USSOUTHCOM and USNORTHCOM insert bureaucracy, resource battles and additional

²³ Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, 61–62.

²⁴ Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, 65.

²⁵ Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, 68.

layers of coordination which tend to filter out information and slow down the decision chain. An article by US Navy Captain Bob Allen, et al., states “the role of the DoD in the National Strategy to combat transnational criminal organizations (C-TCO), specifically NORTHCOM and SOUTHCOM, is not clearly defined despite the Geographic Combatant Commander’s (GCC) responsibilities for homeland defense and security cooperation in Latin America, the nexus of TCOs’ activities impacting US national security. The role of the military is principally focused on addressing the supply component of the illicit trafficking problem presented by TCOs, while the demand component of illicit trafficking is considered as a domestic law enforcement and health care challenge. Regardless, the current GCC construct is not optimized to address these threats which cross borders and undermine the stability of nations, subverting government institutions through corruption, breeding violence, and harming citizens worldwide.”²⁶

The successes of SOUTHCOM and PLAN COLOMBIA have forced TCOs to adapt and move their base of operations out of Colombia. The Joint Interagency Task Force – South (JIATF-S) has successfully integrated federal intelligence, law enforcement, judicial and military organizations to leverage one another’s expertise, resources, and authorities to choke off the traditional drug supply route that moved primarily through the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico.²⁷ Any aircraft or small boats moving through this region are now detected at long range by various military sensors and are then intercepted by US Coast Guard or other law enforcement agencies. This has forced drug smugglers to switch to overland routes that move through Central America and

²⁶ Bob Allen et al., “Aligning for Hemispheric Defense: Synchronizing NORTHCOM and SOUTHCOM Efforts to Combat Transnational Criminal Organizations” (Joint Forces Staff College, 2012), 3, <http://www.faoa.org/Resources/Documents/Multi%20Author%20Thesis%20Aligning%20for%20Hemispheric%20Defense.pdf>.

²⁷ Allen et al., “Aligning for Hemispheric Defense: Synchronizing NORTHCOM and SOUTHCOM Efforts to Combat Transnational Criminal Organizations,” 4.

Mexico.²⁸ This has led to a spread of violence and crime into many countries that were unprepared to deal with it and where the US had less focused resources. As Captain Bob Allen, et al., point out:

Many perceived victories towards countering TCOs have proven transitory and not reduced overall illicit drug supply due to the 'balloon effect,' where pressure against one area drives drug-related activities to another area. Temporary successes in one country or [a] sub-region have often led traffickers to alter their cultivation patterns, production techniques and methods in order to avoid detection. US bilateral efforts have simply pushed the problem from one country to the next. Coca eradication efforts in Peru and Bolivia during the 1980's and 1990's inadvertently pushed production into Colombia, spawning the Medellín, Cali Cartels and FARC. The local success of PLAN COLOMBIA has merely pushed TCOs back into Peru and to Central America. JIATF-S's maritime and air interdiction against illicit trafficking routes through the Caribbean has led to the utilization of terrestrial smuggling routes, destabilizing Central America and increasing violence.²⁹

Dr Kan supports this assertion saying that despite the significant successes of SOUTHCOM, the amount of drugs entering the US has actually gone up, "with 1,500 metric tons of marijuana, 15 metric tons of heroin, 200 metric tons of cocaine, and 20 metric tons of meth coming from Mexico yearly."³⁰ TCOs have proven time and time again that they are very resilient and creative. By identifying and exploiting the cracks in the US's GCC structure, the Cartels have been able to negate the effectiveness of the US's very expensive war on drugs. New routes have led to new markets in the US as well as internationally while new smuggling techniques such as semisubmersibles and ultralights have successfully defeated high-tech US surveillance equipment.³¹ The

²⁸ Allen et al., "Aligning for Hemispheric Defense: Synchronizing NORTHCOM and SOUTHCOM Efforts to Combat Transnational Criminal Organizations," 4.

²⁹ Allen et al., "Aligning for Hemispheric Defense: Synchronizing NORTHCOM and SOUTHCOM Efforts to Combat Transnational Criminal Organizations," 9.

³⁰ Kan, "What We're Getting Wrong About Mexico," 43.

³¹ Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, 33.

amount of drugs flowing into the US is so great that there has been a drop in the street price of narcotics.³² This has led smugglers to shift supplies to Europe where street prices are at least double what they are in the US.³³ A 2011 RAND study states “the mosaic of smuggling conduits extending from Latin America is now arguably more complex than ever before, embracing at least five principal ‘corridors’: a Colombia–Caribbean–Mexico route, a Colombia–eastern Pacific–Mexico route, a Peru–Bolivia–Paraguay–Uruguay–Brazil route, a Brazil–Atlantic–Europe route, a Colombia–Venezuela–Atlantic–Europe route, and a Colombia–Venezuela–Atlantic–West Africa–Europe route.”³⁴

With drugs flowing out from South, Central, and North America around the globe, many GCC’s boundaries are crossed and each one of these seams provides a gap that is currently being exploited. Lack of coordination, failure to handoff narcotics traffickers as they approach these arbitrary borders, and a general lack of focus on the issue of narcotics trafficking outside SOUTHCOM have led to many familiar with the subject to call for significant reorganization. Captain Allen, et al., contends that “without a fundamental realignment of the command and control structures of the Western Hemisphere GCCs along the lines proposed in this paper, DoD capacity to support interagency C-TCO strategy will remain fragmented and fail to achieve the unity of effort necessary to defeat these adaptive transnational threats.”³⁵ Realignment of the GCCs would allow for unity of command and greater effectiveness for the US military within the hemisphere, but it would still be largely ineffective without new authorities, which are unlikely due to significant changes that would have to be made to US law. However, deep integration with other agencies which have the needed authorities is a

³² Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, xi.

³³ Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, 8.

³⁴ Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, 65.

³⁵ Allen et al., “Aligning for Hemispheric Defense: Synchronizing NORTHCOM and SOUTHCOM Efforts to Combat Transnational Criminal Organizations,” 13.

model which has proven very effective in the past. Captain Allen, et al., argue that “authorities available to the GCCs and their subordinate organizations limit the employment of military assets in C-TCO operations and argue for an interagency approach. Title 10 limitations restrict DoD to a support role in C-TCO both domestically and internationally. Requests for domestic DoD support must be routed first through the National Guard, which can be employed in law enforcement operations under Title 32 and State Active Duty authorities. Federal DoD forces can be requested for domestic operations when the National Guard is not available, but cannot be employed in law enforcement activities due to Posse Comitatus Act restrictions.”³⁶ NORTHCOM has taken steps toward an integrated interagency model with the creation of fusion centers. These fusion centers were modeled after a successful coalition antiterrorist task force. Dr Farwell states that “in Iraq, Gen Stanley McChrystal forged a task force that accounted for between 11,000 and 13,000 members of al-Qaeda. Their British counterparts accounted for another 3,500. That was achieved through a fusion team that identified key terrorist leaders and middle echelon loyalists and eliminated them. US-Mexican fusion centers were established, in Mexico City and Monterrey, as well as in regional headquarters. Apparently more limited than McChrystal’s task force, this was still a step in the right direction.”³⁷ A better model for future interagency integration would be JIATF-S whose successes against TCOs are well documented.³⁸

Beyond interagency integration there must be increased cooperation between nations to address these multifaceted problems while respecting national sovereignty. Dr Farwell contends that “a hemispheric approach must be reviewed by looking beyond Mexico to our

³⁶ Allen et al., “Aligning for Hemispheric Defense: Synchronizing NORTHCOM and SOUTHCOM Efforts to Combat Transnational Criminal Organizations,” 9.

³⁷ James Farwell and Darby Arakelian, “War on Our Doorstep Not a Mere Crime Problem,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* Spring 2014 (n.d.): 49, accessed March 18, 2014.

³⁸ Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, 68.

regional neighbors. The drug war threatens Canada as well as Central and South America. Coordinate with Canadian SOF in providing training to Central and South American militaries for counternarcotics and to the military in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and other Latin allies through SOF assistance to help them develop special-mission capabilities for defeating drug traffickers.”³⁹ In addition to Building Partner Capacity (BPC) with tailored training and exercises the US can provide much needed support such intelligence and technical assistance.⁴⁰ Admiral James Stavridis, former head of U.S. Southern Command, stated the US and its partners must adopt a “more holistic, integrated approach” to Western Hemisphere security threats.⁴¹ Dr Brands wrote that “a useful analogy in this regard would be a successful counterinsurgency in which the use of force must be integrated seamlessly into a larger scheme of political, military, social, diplomatic, and economic programs, all of which reinforce—rather than competing with or undermining—one another.”⁴²

Defining the Problem, Divining a Solution

You have the rest of your life to solve your problems. How long you live depends on how well you do it. – Clint Smith

How a nation views a problem is often partially defined by the organization that the nation tasks with addressing the problem. Dr Kan contends that “defining the particular type of organized violence has deep and far-reaching implications for policy makers responsible for designing the strategies that need to be implemented by those who face this ongoing violence on a daily basis. Terms such as ‘insurgency’ and ‘terrorism’ create policy options and strategic choices distinct from those that would be in responses to ‘criminality.’”⁴³ The definitions our policy

³⁹ Farwell and Arakelian, “War on Our Doorstep Not a Mere Crime Problem,” 50.

⁴⁰ Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, 67.

⁴¹ Brands, Hal, “Mexico’s Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counterdrug Policy,” 26.

⁴² Brands, Hal, “Mexico’s Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counterdrug Policy,” 26.

⁴³ Kan, “What We’re Getting Wrong About Mexico,” 37.

makers use effect how a problem or a solution is framed and presented internationally. The acceptance or rejection of this definition has far reaching implications on what can be achieved. Dr Farwell writes that “how the war is characterized matters as to what body of law governs it—the law regulating law enforcement or the law of armed conflict? The answer affects tactics and the nature of forces employed. For example, while police can use deadly force against suspects who pose a threat of serious physical harm, the principle of military necessity authorizes a military to take all necessary measures not prohibited by international law to defeat an enemy. The US and Mexican militaries have a role in low-intensity conflict, fighting an insurgency, or combating terrorism, especially if those terrorist groups support al-Qaeda.”⁴⁴ With the importance of definitions established, the question is: How does the US define the current violence and lawlessness in Mexico, and is that definition correct?

Dr Farwell states that “most observers, including the Mexican government, believe this to be a law enforcement problem.”⁴⁵ Clearly, the US government believes this is the case based upon numerous policy statements, aid expenditures, and designation of organizational roles.⁴⁶ Currently, law enforcement agencies are designated as the supported command with military organizations as supporting elements. This belief that the problems in Mexico require a law enforcement solution are beginning to change. Former secretary of state Hillary Clinton declared in a press conference following a speech to the Council on Foreign Relations that the cartels “are showing more and more indices of insurgencies.”⁴⁷ Critics have countered this by saying “cartels have not ‘captured’ the state to implement a social or political agenda and are not seeking to overthrow the government and replace it with their own, but

⁴⁴ Farwell and Arakelian, “War on Our Doorstep Not a Mere Crime Problem,” 41–42.

⁴⁵ Farwell and Arakelian, “War on Our Doorstep Not a Mere Crime Problem,” 41.

⁴⁶ Brands, Hal, “Mexico’s Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counterdrug Policy,” 18.

⁴⁷ Farwell and Arakelian, “War on Our Doorstep Not a Mere Crime Problem,” 47.

focus on shoving the state aside in their pursuit of profits.”⁴⁸ This is a fair critique. Can there be an insurgency without the cartels providing an alternative government or ideology to the Mexican government?

The cartels have taken great effort to spin a positive narrative about themselves as the protectors of the downtrodden. In a strange twist, violent criminal organizations driven by commercial profit have taken a page from Marxist doctrine and exploited successfully societal fissures of class and economics. Dr Farwell states that “cartels articulate a story defining themselves as rooted in the romantic nineteenth-century image of a bandito preying upon the rich and a national history in which wealthy Mexicans and foreign investors have controlled much of the economy, leaving most Mexicans impoverished. Cartel ballads and music videos stem directly from the Mexican folk tradition of romanticizing revolutionary heroes and legend, except that today’s songs glorify drug lords.”⁴⁹ The narrative is necessary to gain support of the population and to prevent Mexican citizens from assisting government efforts to eradicate the cartels. The cartels are increasingly interested in taking political power and providing basic services to the population. Former Mexican President Calderón said that “this criminal behavior...has become a challenge to the state, an attempt to replace the state.”⁵⁰ Dr Farwell contends that the cartels “have created an atmosphere of fear and intimidation that impairs the government’s ability to operate in any normal fashion in providing security or ensuring the welfare of the people. Tactics of intimidation have choked off press freedom. They have superseded or seriously weakened the government in a growing number of Mexican states, even in places becoming a parallel government. Reportedly, the cartels spend a billion dollars

⁴⁸ Farwell and Arakelian, “War on Our Doorstep Not a Mere Crime Problem,” 42.

⁴⁹ Farwell and Arakelian, “War on Our Doorstep Not a Mere Crime Problem,” 45.

⁵⁰ Farwell and Arakelian, “War on Our Doorstep Not a Mere Crime Problem,” 46.

annually to bribe police.”⁵¹ The Mexican government is ceding ground both literally and in the political loyalties of a large number of Mexican people. Dr Farwell contends that the “Mexican leadership must persuade its population, especially its elites (who arguably have too often helped, not fought, the cartels), middle class, unions, and civil society organizations to support the fight against the cartels—stop kidnapping, extortion, robbery, human trafficking, arms smuggling, and drug trafficking. Calderón failed to lay a solid political foundation for waging the war. Success requires persuading Mexicans their own lives depend on defeating the cartels. The challenge is difficult, but Nieto must avoid repeating Calderón’s mistakes.”⁵²

Politically this is a tough call for President Nieto. If he follows Dr Farwell’s recommendation he must admit that the problem is getting out of hand and that the cartels are a real threat to the security of the Mexican state. No leader wants to publically admit to weakness and ask for assistance; this is especially true in the Caudillo culture that permeates much of Latin America. However, the desires of a nation’s leadership or bravado do not change the reality of what is going on. Dr Manwarring wrote that “the current situation in Mexico is more than a law enforcement problem. When gangs become de facto governments, they also become social actors. These social actors, who are also criminal-soldiers, are changing social, economic, and political organizations and violently ‘barbarizing’ accepted values and modes of human behavior. A future vision of larger and larger parts of the global community adapting to criminal values and forms of behavior should be, at minimum, ‘unsettling.’ In the meantime, the present vision of the human capacity to treat the gunshots and terrified screams from ‘down the street’ as mere background noise to unexceptional everyday life should create, at the least, a vague unease. This issue is more than a

⁵¹ Farwell and Arakelian, “War on Our Doorstep Not a Mere Crime Problem,” 46.

⁵² Farwell and Arakelian, “War on Our Doorstep Not a Mere Crime Problem,” 49.

law enforcement problem, and it is more than a challenge to national sovereignty.”⁵³

The problems facing Mexico require more than simply adding police. Dr Kan says that “the number of police officers is not a problem in Mexico. With 366 officers per 100,000 people, Mexico has a better ratio of police to citizens than the United States, Britain, France, or Italy.”⁵⁴ The strategy that is required to stabilize Mexico is one found in successful counterinsurgency campaigns. Any efforts must reestablish security for the population, provide basic services, root out corruption, and establish a working justice system for legitimate dispute resolution and criminal justice. Sending in military forces to provide additional law enforcement and fire power has been the strategy of the Mexican government thus far and it has not been successful. Albert Einstein is often quoted as saying that the definition of insanity “is doing the same thing over-and-over again and expecting different results.” Dr Farwell suggest that Mexico needs to adopt a new strategy, a “holistic approach and unity of effort to achieve security, drug eradication, social reform, judicial reform, crackdowns on corruption, multinational partnerships with neighbors who the drug war affects directly and indirectly, and special-mission military efforts against heavily armed and trained cartels. It is an iterative, unique approach.”⁵⁵

Analysis

Both the Bush and Obama administrations have recognized the importance of the relationship between the US and Mexico. However, the two administration’s policies differed greatly, not only on the type of assistance offered to the Mexican government, but also in defining the root cause of its instability. President Bush focused his efforts primarily

⁵³ Max G. Manwaring and Army War College (U.S.), *A Contemporary Challenge to State Sovereignty: Gangs and Other Illicit Transnational Criminal Organizations in Central America, El Salvador, Mexico, Jamaica, and Brazil*, Security Issues in the Western Hemisphere (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2007), 32.

⁵⁴ Kan, “What We’re Getting Wrong About Mexico,” 45.

⁵⁵ Farwell and Arakelian, “War on Our Doorstep Not a Mere Crime Problem,” 47.

on the supply side of the narcotics problem while President Obama continues to see the problem from a US demand perspective. Neither of the recent US policies have reduced violence in Mexico or illegal drugs on the streets of America. This is not to say that there have not been tactical level successes. Clearly operations in SOUTHCOM have been so effective that the cartels were forced to make drastic changes. Unfortunately, with \$25 billion on the line, the cartels found a way to not only adapt, but to exploit cracks in the US GCC structure and codified authorities.⁵⁶ With new smuggling routes and expanded markets, the cartels are thriving.

To reverse this trend, the US should consider making three changes to the organizational structures of the various organizations tasked with antidrug efforts. First, the US should consider realigning the GCC structures of NORTCOM and SOUTHCOM into a single GCC that is focused on threats in the western hemisphere. Captain Allen, et al., contend that “NORTHCOM and SOUTHCOM, along with regional partners, must achieve a unity of effort to provide a defense in depth against the illicit trafficking threat posed by TCOs. In order to achieve this objective, the U.S. will need to fundamentally realign its military command and control structure in the Western Hemisphere.”⁵⁷

Second, there is an urgent need to establish integrated interagency organizations to leverage the various agency skill sets, authorities, and assets. The expertise and authorities needed to address the multifaceted nature the narcotics trade already exist with the US government. Diverse organizational priorities, information compartmentalization, and organizational “turf wars” continue to hinder the brave men and women tasked with stopping the plague of violence and drugs in Mexico and the US. The clunky and friction-laden nature of the current organizational

⁵⁶ Brands, Hal, “Mexico’s Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counterdrug Policy,” 10.

⁵⁷ Allen et al., “Aligning for Hemispheric Defense: Synchronizing NORTHCOM and SOUTHCOM Efforts to Combat Transnational Criminal Organizations,” 3.

structure allows time sensitive targets to slip away. The fleeting nature of smuggling operations requires a smoothly coordinated, almost automatic response. A working model is already established in JIATF-S and this could be used as a template for others to follow.

Third, the US and Mexico must recognize that the problem has escalated beyond severe criminal activity. Dr Brands states that “for now, the cartels seem to be winning this battle; despite the best efforts of Presidents Vicente Fox and Felipe Calderón, the drug trade has continued apace and drug-related violence has reached ever higher levels of intensity.” Current efforts are not working and denial is not an effective strategy. To continue along the same path while expecting different results is illogical. Just as a doctor must first accurately diagnose a patient’s condition before a course of treatment can be applied, the leadership of the US and Mexico must accurately diagnose the nature of the problem. Definitions matter for garnering public support for an expanded campaign, justifying additional funding, and for altering expectations of what measures can or should be taken when addressing the problem.

Only by recognizing the problem for what it actually is will Mexico and the US be able to muster the political will, resources, and develop both the political narrative and strategy that meets the task at hand. Dr Kan offers that “the US and Mexico will be inevitably bound together in whatever future scenario or scenarios unfold. Policies and strategies will have to be carefully coordinated to avoid stoking even greater cartel violence, increasing the amount of drugs smuggled into the United States, and possibly eroding Mexico’s governmental capacity further. A lack of coordination or impromptu acts by either government only runs the risk of making the worst-case scenario a reality.”⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Kan, “What We’re Getting Wrong About Mexico,” 45.

The US has successfully engaged in focused bilateral antidrug campaigns before. The next chapter will examine the most famous of these, PLAN COLOMBIA. This long term US aid effort to Colombia is credited largely with stabilizing the nation and destroying the Cali and Medellín cartels. Using it as a case study, will highlight some possible US assistance strategies for consideration in Mexico. While there are vast differences between the geography, politics, and populations of Mexico and Colombia, there are also many similarities in the circumstances of the people, violence, and motivations of the cartels. Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton described Mexico as “looking more and more like Colombia looked twenty years ago.”⁵⁹



⁵⁹ Kan, “What We’re Getting Wrong About Mexico,” 37.

Chapter 4

PLAN COLOMBIA – A Case Study

If you are not prepared to use force to defend civilization, then be prepared to accept barbarism. – Thomas Sowell

This chapter provides a detailed look at PLAN COLOMBIA and US involvement in reestablishing rule of law in Colombia. It begins by exploring how the insurgent groups known as FARC and ELN annexed the Colombian drug trade to fund their communist revolution which eroded the Colombian government's legitimacy and control of territory. Second, it looks at how President Clinton launched PLAN COLOMBIA to provide US training, advisors, intelligence, funding and equipment to reverse the tide of this insurgency. Next, it explains how the current situation in Mexico is similar to that of Colombia in the 1980s-1990s and where lessons learned from PLAN COLOMBIA may hold value. Finally, it will point out where the situation in Mexico is different from that of Colombia and where due caution should be taken before applying lessons learned wholesale.

Colombia's Descent into Chaos

Colombia is South America's second most populous nation with a population of 45 million and the world's third largest Spanish speaking nation. Colombia has a land mass roughly the size of Texas and California combined, covered with dense jungles, and dominated by the Andes Mountains. The nation's geography is unique in South America. It is the only South American nation connected by land to Central America. It also has access to both the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. Isacson and Poe, of the Center for International Policy, state "Colombia's geography is more complex than that of most of its neighbors...This in turn has eased the undetected transshipment of narcotics, making

Colombia an early haven for the drug trade.”¹ Additionally, with coca (the plant processed to make cocaine) growing naturally in this region, little government presence in rural areas, and large populations of poor disenfranchised people, one can see how Colombia became the world’s number one source of cocaine.² A 2011 RAND study noted that “besides cocaine, Colombia also represents a relatively important source of opiates for North America. According to State Department officials in Bogotá, the country traditionally accounted for around half of the white heroin consumed east of the Mississippi.”³

Colombia’s drug problem evolved in much the same way as Mexico’s, only predating their problem by twenty years. It began as a criminal enterprise to turn coca into a cash crop. The vast profit margins available by selling the refined cocaine (later even more profitable crack cocaine) allowed the cartels to grow rapidly and consolidate power. The two most prominent were the Medellín and Cali cartels. These organizations were true criminal empires and were pursued by both Colombian and US law enforcement. With the two cartels battling each other for territory and fending off Colombian law enforcement, they formed alliances with local communist insurgent forces. The struggling communist forces, oddly enough, received massive infusions of cash from the illegal commercial activities of the cartels.⁴ In exchange, the cartels received security from the insurgent forces. The cartel’s newly acquired paramilitary forces vastly increased their lethality. They wielded this power often, and without remorse. The violence in Colombia in the late 1980s and early 1990s became so bad

¹ Adam Isacson and Abigail Poe, “After Plan Colombia Evaluating ‘Integrated Action,’ the Next Phase of U.S. Assistance,” *International Policy Report*, December 2009, 3.

² Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, 13.

³ Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, 13.

⁴ Jess Ford, *PLAN COLOMBIA Drug Reduction Goals Were Not Fully Met, but Security Has Improved; U.S. Agencies Need More Detailed Plans for Reducing Assistance*, Report to the Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr., Chairman, Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate (Washington, DC: United States Government Accountability Office, October 2008), 8.

that it received international attention. As Isacson and Poe point out “The Medellín and Cali drug cartels’ bloody rise drew the notice of the United States. Military and especially police assistance began to increase during the Reagan and [George H.W.] Bush administrations.”⁵ This attention from the west resulted in the arrests of many key leaders within the cartels weakening them but not eradicating them. The organizations that emerged were fundamentally different and far more difficult to control. Antione Bousquet, noted author on managing chaos in warfare wrote, “in the aftermath of the successful dismantling of the Cali and Medellín cartels in the 1990s, the Colombian drug trade has shifted towards a network of several hundred smaller groups which spread activities more widely and is now considerably more resilient to traditional decapitation strikes aimed at taking out key leaders since operations have become far more decentralized.”⁶ As the cartels fractured and became less centralized the paramilitary organizations became more powerful and began to take over the “business” side of the operation.

A Drug Fueled Rage

A civil war is not a war, but a disease. The enemy is internal. One almost fights against oneself. And this is undoubtedly why this war takes this terrible form. There are more executions than battles.
– Antoine de Saint-Exupery

The FARC was no new threat to Colombian government, but an old pestilence that flourished because of the drug trade. As Rollins and Wyler of the Congressional Research Service point out “The FARC emerged more than 40 years ago as a Marxist-Leninist guerilla organization and an outgrowth of peasant self-defense leagues based in Colombia. In 1997, it was designated by the State Department as a

⁵ Isacson and Poe, “After Plan Colombia Evaluating ‘Integrated Action,’ the Next Phase of U.S. Assistance,” 3.

⁶ Antoine J Bosquet, *Scientific Way of Warfare: Order and Chaos on the Battlefields of Modernity*. ([S.l.]: Oxford University Press, 2010), 209.

Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO)...For years, the organization has committed bombings, assassinations, and kidnappings of Colombian government officials and civilians, as well as perpetrating more conventional military attacks against government and economic targets. Kidnappings and extortion, and later drug trafficking, are among the FARC's primary sources of funding for its operations...It is also believed to have entered into strategic alliances with external criminal syndicates and other terrorist organizations.”⁷ The FARC systematically pushed the government out thereby establishing control of its territory through force and fear. The FARC targeted government officials and prominent citizens in order to send the message that no one was safe from their reach. Rollins and Wyler state that “the organization even formed a special unit for taking hostages. In 2003, ransoms were paid to secure the release of 673 people. As of April 2009, the FARC was holding 28 political hostages, including a former governor and a city assemblyperson.”⁸ The ELN, learning from the successes of the FARC, began to adopt their business model and tactics.⁹ While initially successful, the ELN quickly found itself targeted by both the Colombian government as well as FARC forces.¹⁰ Dr Chalk states “at its height, the organization could count on about 5,000 members who operated from five war fronts mostly concentrated in an extended region that stretched from the middle Magdalena Valley to the Venezuelan border.”¹¹ However, despite setbacks, the ELN continued to control sizable territory by brutality and fear. In fact the ELN's tactics became crueler as they began to experience losses. Renowned counterinsurgency author David Kilcullen

⁷ John Rollins and Liana Sun Wyler, *International Terrorism and Transnational Crime: Security Threats, U.S. Policy, and Considerations for Congress*, International Terrorism and Transnational Crime: Threats, Policy, and Considerations (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, March 18, 2010), 16–17, www.crs.gov.

⁸ Rollins and Wyler, *International Terrorism and Transnational Crime: Security Threats, U.S. Policy, and Considerations for Congress*, 18.

⁹ Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, 22.

¹⁰ Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, 22.

¹¹ Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, 22.

explains the timeless insurgent tactic of controlling the population by day with the fear instilled by actions of the previous night:

Insurgents seek to prevent local populations from cooperating with governments or coalition forces by publicly killing those who collaborate, intimidating others who might seek to work with the government, and co-opting others. This dynamic was highlighted by the classical insurgency theorist Bernard B. Fall, who served in the French Resistance in World War II; he wrote in 1965 that any sound revolutionary warfare operator (the French underground, the Norwegian underground, or any other anti-Nazi European underground) most of the time used small-war tactics—not to destroy the German army, of which they were thoroughly incapable, but to establish a competitive system of control over the population. Of course, in order to do this, here and there they had to kill some of the occupying forces and attack some military targets. But above all they had to kill their own people who collaborated with the enemy.¹²

The level of fear inspired by the FARC in the local communities was so high that a provincial Colombian judge said “the people stay silent out of fear, because here you can’t open your mouth much—if you open your mouth here it will fill with flies.”¹³ With the government effectively shut out of vast swaths of the country side, the FARC went about creating its own rule of law in the territory it controlled. Isacson and Poe report that as “late as 2004-2005, the FARC’s control was reportedly so complete that people not only had guerrilla-issued ID cards, even their horses were required to have a carnet de caballo.”¹⁴

By 2000 the FARC was the world’s largest cocaine producer and distributor. General Cesar Pinson, Chief of Colombia’s anti-narcotics police force, refers to the FARC as “the big cartel.”¹⁵ Dr Chalk notes that “the FARC...is involved in all aspects of the drug trade, from production

¹² David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 39.

¹³ Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, 178.

¹⁴ Isacson and Poe, “After Plan Colombia Evaluating ‘Integrated Action,’ the Next Phase of U.S. Assistance,” 11. Carnet de caballo is a registration or license for horse drawn coaches.

¹⁵ Howard and Joint Special Operations University (U.S.), *The Nexus of Extremism and Trafficking*, 22.

through refining to trafficking, and is thought to earn anywhere between \$200 million and \$300 million per year from these activities.

Historically, most of this income was used to underwrite and sustain FARC's insurgent war against the Bogotá government. In recent years, however, it appears that elements in the organization have increasingly turned to narcotics as an exclusive economic endeavor, with greed and profit rather than politics and ideology being the main motivational drivers."¹⁶ Regardless of whether the FARC's main motivation is Marxism or capitalism, their actions and territorial gains of the 1990s and early 2000s were brutal and shocking.

With over 70,000 killed in twenty years, the Colombian government, in a move that startled the US, began to sue for peace with the FARC.¹⁷ As Rollins and Wyler note "the Colombian government provided the FARC with ostensible control over 42,000 square kilometers in the southern Caqueta region as a basis for peace negotiations. With a haven free from government interference, the FARC turned the territory into a drug depot."¹⁸ The US strategy for the "War on Drugs" was caught flatfooted. For over 15 years, the US had been focused primarily on the illegal narcotics operation and largely ignoring the growing insurgency. But now the two were one and the same and the Colombian government appeared to be on the verge of capitulating. According to Isacson and Poe "the guerrillas' advance in particular began to worry the U.S. government, whose Colombia policy had been focused mainly on the drug war. The government of Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002) launched an effort to negotiate peace with the FARC, which quickly faltered, causing

¹⁶ Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, xii.

¹⁷ Isacson and Poe, "After Plan Colombia Evaluating 'Integrated Action,' the Next Phase of U.S. Assistance," 3.

¹⁸ Rollins and Wyler, *International Terrorism and Transnational Crime: Security Threats, U.S. Policy, and Considerations for Congress*, 17-18.

Clinton administration officials to worry openly about an imminent guerrilla takeover.”¹⁹ A drastic change to US policy was on the horizon.

PLAN COLOMBIA

In a coordinated effort with the Colombian government, the US launched PLAN COLOMBIA in July of 2000. With less than 6 months left in office, President Clinton signed a \$1.3 billion appropriations bill into law with \$860 million in aid for Colombia.²⁰ According to the US Government Accountability Office (GAO), with coca production increasing by 300 percent and opium by 75 percent in the seven years prior to PLAN COLOMBIA the US/Colombian strategy was to cut the heart out of the FARC’s revenue source.²¹ Over seventy five percent of initial US aid would be ear-marked for military and law enforcement who would drive deep into FARC territory. Isacson and Poe state that “the aid package’s centerpiece was a push into southern Colombian coca growing areas, greatly increasing operations in a FARC-dominated zone around the department of Putumayo, which at the time was producing the majority of Colombia’s coca leaf.”²²

The attacks of September 11th, 2001 changed fundamentally the way the US looked at the ongoing insurgency in Colombia. The FARC’s terrorist acts and ties to other FTOs placed them squarely in the sights of America’s Global War on Terrorism. Congress approved vast amounts of funding to any nation asking for help in fighting indigenous terrorist groups. According to Isacson and Poe “between 2000 and 2007, the Clinton and Bush administrations provided Colombia with \$5.4 billion in assistance, 80.5 percent of it for the security forces. This was

¹⁹ Isacson and Poe, “After Plan Colombia Evaluating ‘Integrated Action,’ the Next Phase of U.S. Assistance,” 4.

²⁰ Isacson and Poe, “After Plan Colombia Evaluating ‘Integrated Action,’ the Next Phase of U.S. Assistance,” 4.

²¹ Ford, *PLAN COLOMBIA Drug Reduction Goals Were Not Fully Met, but Security Has Improved; U.S. Agencies Need More Detailed Plans for Reducing Assistance*, 8–9.

²² Isacson and Poe, “After Plan Colombia Evaluating ‘Integrated Action,’ the Next Phase of U.S. Assistance,” 4.

accompanied by a major buildup in Colombia's own military expenditure...from 2000 to 2009, the size of Colombia's military and police forces nearly doubled to a combined 500,000 members, while the defense budget tripled to nearly \$12 billion."²³

PLAN COLOMBIA would not rely on brute strength alone to turn the tide against the insurgency. Funding provided by the US was closely monitored and heavy emphasis was given to intelligence, mobility assets, and special quick reaction forces. Smuggling operations and insurgent activities by their nature are fleeting. Counternarcotics and counterinsurgent operations rely on good intelligence to focus limited military and police forces on surprising and overwhelming the enemy. However the best intelligence is worthless without specialized forces that can exploit the intelligence and the mobility assets to get them to the target area before the enemy melts away. Dr Chalk states that during "the past ten years, support has included...radar systems, helicopter troop carriers, and various forms of heavy artillery; the institution of in-country training programs aimed at augmenting coastal surveillance and interdiction, port security, containerized cargo inspections, and high-speed pursuit tactics; the deployment of U.S. special forces advisers to create elite antidrug units in both the police and army; and the provision of technical advice and equipment to facilitate ground and aerial crop-eradication efforts. Most of this aid has been supplied in the context of PLAN COLOMBIA...greatly expanded under the presidency of Álvaro Uribe with the full backing of the George W. Bush administration, this broad menu of policy proposals seeks to deal with all aspects of the country's domestic political, social, economic, and military ills."²⁴ The GOA reports that the three most successful military aid programs have

²³Isacson and Poe, "After Plan Colombia Evaluating 'Integrated Action,' the Next Phase of U.S. Assistance," 4.

²⁴ Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, 59.

been US funded helicopters, illicit crop eradication programs, and US advisors.²⁵

One of the most controversial programs has been the aerial and manual coca and poppy plant eradication efforts. Critics primarily attack the aerial efforts which some claim causes health problems for people exposed to the chemical sprays. Others claim that plants are becoming more resilient and current chemicals are losing their effectiveness. Additionally, aerial eradication efforts are staggeringly expensive and opponents say that this money is better spent on other efforts. However, a 2011 RAND study cites that “between 1998 and 2009, the area subjected to manual eradication increased from 3,125 hectare (ha) to 60,577 ha, while aerial spraying—using a formula known as Roundup® rose by more than 58 percent, from 66,029 ha to 104,772 ha. Between 2003 and 2009, the Bogotá government invested \$835 million to underwrite these programs, a figure that is expected to surge to \$1.5 billion by 2013...rated as the most-ambitious such program in the world and is estimated to have been instrumental in preventing 160 MT of cocaine per year from reaching the US.”²⁶

The US advisor programs have been far from controversial. Supporters and opponents of PLAN COLOMBIA have credited the advisor program for professionalizing Colombia’s military and police forces, building trust with local communities, and reducing the number of government committed human rights violations.²⁷ Dr Thomas Marks of the National Defense University, states that “military reform was central to all that occurred...focused mainly on revitalizing the military education system, turning lessons learned into operational and organizational modifications, and developing sound NCO leadership to

²⁵ Ford, *PLAN COLOMBIA Drug Reduction Goals Were Not Fully Met, but Security Has Improved; U.S. Agencies Need More Detailed Plans for Reducing Assistance*, Executive Summary.

²⁶ Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, 60–63.

²⁷ Ford, *PLAN COLOMBIA Drug Reduction Goals Were Not Fully Met, but Security Has Improved; U.S. Agencies Need More Detailed Plans for Reducing Assistance*, Executive Summary.

enhance small unit performance. Simultaneously, greater attention was paid to human rights instruction, information warfare, and joint and special operations.”²⁸ With increased professionalism, esprit-de-corps, and a higher percentage of volunteers within the force came a dramatic drop in corruption as well as an extraordinary increase in performance.

Learning from its own successes with JIATF-S, SOUTHCOM worked with the Colombian Defense Ministry to develop a doctrine of “Integrated Action,” which has developed creative solutions which leverage and exploit the strengths and authorities of the two nations to address the narcoinsurgency.²⁹ Isacson and Poe state that “together, they developed a national coordination body called the Center for Coordination of Integrated Action (CCAI)...SOUTHCOM continues to offer training, advice, military construction and logistical support. Some funding for CCAI support has come from the State Department-managed Foreign Military Financing program, but much has come from sources in the Department of Defense’s own budget: counter-drug authorities and ‘Section 1206 Train and Equip’ authority, a controversial 2006 provision allowing the Pentagon to use its own budget to train and equip foreign militaries.”³⁰

A Change of PLAN

2007 would usher in a dramatic shift in strategy for PLAN COLOMBIA. After seven years of success primarily driven by military and law enforcement efforts much of the territory once under FARC or ELN control was back under the control of the Colombian government. Colombia, under stiff pressure from the US, would begin a new phase in its campaign against the insurgency. Following a counter insurgency strategy that is remarkably similar to those espoused by Kilcullen or

²⁸ Thomas Marks, “A Model Counterinsurgency: Uribe’s Colombia (2002-2006) vs FARC,” *Military Review*, no. March-April 2007 (March 2007): 43.

²⁹ Isacson and Poe, “After Plan Colombia Evaluating ‘Integrated Action,’ the Next Phase of U.S. Assistance,” 6.

³⁰ Isacson and Poe, “After Plan Colombia Evaluating ‘Integrated Action,’ the Next Phase of U.S. Assistance,” 6–8.

General David Petraeus, the Colombian strategy called for three phases of control, stabilization, and consolidation.³¹ In phase one, government forces had reclaimed territory through force. Phase two led to the establishment of security and basic services to rural communities. Phase three focused on reintegration of former hostile forces, creation of licit jobs, and quality of life efforts.³² Isacson and Poe contend “US aid to Colombia began to change in 2007, following the Democratic Party’s takeover of the US Congress. Military and police assistance for 2008 and 2009 were cut by over \$150 million, with the herbicide fumigation program hit the hardest, while resources for development, judicial reform, human rights and humanitarian aid were increased by \$100 million enforcement of human rights conditions was strengthened, slowing the flow of some military assistance.”³³ Shrinking budgets have also forced US advisors to accelerate the timeline for turnover of certain missions to Colombian authorities. According to the GAO “in response to...budget cuts in fiscal year 2008, State and the other US departments and agencies have accelerated their nationalization efforts, with State focusing on Colombian military and National Police aviation programs.”³⁴ Despite minor setbacks the \$1.3 billion “consolidation effort” is credited with providing aid to populations displaced by violence, reforming the justice system, and providing hundreds of thousands of people with legitimate work.³⁵

³¹ Isacson and Poe, “After Plan Colombia Evaluating ‘Integrated Action,’ the Next Phase of U.S. Assistance,” 7.

³² Ford, *PLAN COLOMBIA Drug Reduction Goals Were Not Fully Met, but Security Has Improved; U.S. Agencies Need More Detailed Plans for Reducing Assistance*, Executive Summary.

³³ Isacson and Poe, “After Plan Colombia Evaluating ‘Integrated Action,’ the Next Phase of U.S. Assistance,” 6.

³⁴ Ford, *PLAN COLOMBIA Drug Reduction Goals Were Not Fully Met, but Security Has Improved; U.S. Agencies Need More Detailed Plans for Reducing Assistance*, Executive Summary.

³⁵ Ford, *PLAN COLOMBIA Drug Reduction Goals Were Not Fully Met, but Security Has Improved; U.S. Agencies Need More Detailed Plans for Reducing Assistance*, Executive Summary.

PLAN COLOMBIA Report Card

By almost every credible account PLAN COLOMBIA has been a resounding success. The Colombian government is no longer on the brink of collapse, it has reestablished rule of law to millions of its people, and the FARC and ELN appear to be on the ropes. Dr Marks states that “all parties to the present Colombian political debate, for example, agree that by any metric utilized (e.g., a decline in kidnapping and murder), there has been demonstrable (even stunning) progress towards normalcy.”³⁶ Fighting has taken a much heavier toll on insurgent forces than they can sustain, and with their grip broken in sanctuary areas many Colombians have switched allegiance to national forces. Dr Chalk wrote that “the insurgent threat emanating from ELN has steadily declined over the past nine years, however, reflecting defections, losses at the hands of the Colombian security forces (which combined have seen their numbers shrink by as much as one-third), and a steady reduction of territory as a result of protracted conflicts.”³⁷

In 2006 the government negotiated a demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) agreement which allowed drastically reduced jail sentences for paramilitary members who confessed their crimes and entered into a government employment program.³⁸ The FARC, which sustained even worse casualty rates than the ELN, saw one-sixth of its remaining membership voluntarily turn in their weapons and surrender themselves to the mercy of the state when offered the opportunity to reintegrate. Dr Chalk states that “certainly, FARC is weaker as an insurgent force today than it has ever been. The group’s current total membership is around half that in 2001. According to Colombian Ministry of National Defense figures, between 2006 and 2008, the group lost 17,274 combatants—5,316 through voluntary demobilizations and

³⁶ Marks, “A Model Counterinsurgency: Uribe’s Colombia (2002-2006) vs FARC,” 50.

³⁷ Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, 22.

³⁸ Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, 18.

the remainder through captures and casualties. That said, it is too early to conclude that FARC has fully abandoned its insurgent agenda. More likely, it reflects growing command-and-control problems that have confronted the organization as a result of the loss of some of its key leaders in 2008.”³⁹

Eye of the Hurricane?

It is the dead lion that gets up and eats you – African Proverb

While it is clear that PLAN COLOMBIA has improved the lives of most Colombians and significantly weakened the insurgency there is still much room for improvement. The FARC has a very effective propaganda campaign and seizes on each mistake made by the Colombian government to rebuild its crumbling narcotics empire. Dr Chalk contends that aerial crop eradication efforts seem to be backfiring. He states “crop spraying has also been linked to various adverse health effects. Roundup, for instance, has resulted in fever, eye irritation, gastrointestinal complaints, skin rashes, and dizziness. Moreover, fumigation is essentially an indiscriminate counternarcotics measure in the sense that it can destroy both licit and illicit crops. Taken together, these outcomes can have a highly detrimental impact on popular support for the government, driving local producers into the hands of insurgents and legitimating their rhetoric that the government is engaged in a rapacious drive to destroy peasant livelihoods. Such an outcome could hand FARC a boon of popular support precisely at a time when it is otherwise reeling from critical leadership losses.”⁴⁰ Additionally, the Colombian government vastly underestimated the number of paramilitary defectors that would apply for the DDR process. With over 30,000 applicants the program could not deliver what it promised.⁴¹ With 75 percent unable to find a job many have turned once again to a

³⁹ Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, 17.

⁴⁰ Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, 64.

⁴¹ Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, 19.

life of crime joining smaller criminal gangs.⁴² This more fragmented and decentralized criminal network while being less threatening to the state, is proving to be very resilient and difficult for police and military organizations to control.

The successes of PLAN COLOMBIA have forced the cartels in their various forms to adapt and develop new ways to produce and distribute their product. As mentioned in chapter 3 they have successfully exploited gaps between NORTHCOM and SOUTHCOM, and established routes to avoid US detection by smuggling to Africa and Europe. Additionally, the cartels are developing countermeasures for US ISR assets. A 2011 RAND study found that “syndicates have progressively moved away from shipping large volumes via direct routes due to more-effective interdiction in the eastern Pacific. The preferred method today is to spread risk by smuggling smaller but more-numerous volumes in ‘go-fasts.’ These vessels have a top speed of around 70 mph and are capable of moving up to 2 MT of drugs at a time. Apart from surface boats, Colombian syndicates also use semisubmersibles. These vessels are principally employed for large drug runs in the eastern Pacific and can carry loads of between 6 and 10 MT. The standard range for a semi is between 500 and 1,000 nautical miles (nm). However, some have been purpose-built to reach distances upward of 1,500 nm, which puts them well within the vicinity of Mexican waters.”⁴³ The US and Colombia are locked in a long-term fight with a determined, well-financed, and intelligent enemy. The US raised the stakes with high technology ISR and the cartels are responding with stealthy delivery vehicles. Dr Chalk points out that “in 2010, DEA reportedly seized a fully functional, completely submersible vessel that authorities believe had been constructed for transoceanic voyages. If verified, this would mark a

⁴² Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, 19.

⁴³ Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, xiv.

‘quantum leap’ in drug-smuggling evasion technology.”⁴⁴ There is no “silver bullet” solution to the international drug trade, each day is a new game of high stakes cat and mouse. PLAN COLOMBIA reestablished the Colombian government’s dominance over the FARC and ELN in this ruthless struggle.

Déjà vu?

The current drug violence in Mexico bears a striking resemblance to Colombia’s battle with narco-insurgents. By identifying common elements one may be able to apply lessons learned from PLAN COLOMBIA for possible implementation in Mexico’s fight against the cartels. The most obvious similarity, not only between Mexico and Colombia but in common with most states experiencing an insurgency, is an inherent weakness of the government. Insurgencies, like an infection, fester in hosts too weak to defend themselves. John Mackinlay, noted expert on insurgencies, wrote that “at the other end of the scale of competence, against a government that was so weak that it could no longer exercise control over its territory, the insurgent moved more boldly and more carelessly. If the government and its security forces were almost flat on their back with the debilitating effects of corruption and poverty, there was very little need for secure communications and clandestine logistical arrangements.”⁴⁵ This was the case in Colombia prior to the radical changes driven by PLAN COLOMBIA and appears to be the case in Mexico today. Dr Marks states that President Uribe realized “lack of personal security was at the root of Colombia’s social, economic, and political ills. This lack of personal security stemmed from the state’s absence from large swaths of the national territory. Therefore, all elements of national power needed to be directed toward ending this lack of national integration.”⁴⁶ Corruption, poverty, and lack of security

⁴⁴ Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, 36.

⁴⁵ Mackinlay, *Insurgent Archipelago*, 37.

⁴⁶ Marks, “A Model Counterinsurgency: Uribe’s Colombia (2002-2006) vs FARC,” 46.

plague Mexico and if drastic steps are not taken to change these environmental factors one would expect the cartels to continue to flourish.

It may sound simplistic but drug cartels have to be able to spend their money for it to be worth having. Before the cartels can spend the money it must be laundered. This is done in various ways but the process is never perfect and some trail is left for authorities to track back to the source. Rollins and Wyler note that “a classic example of trade-based money laundering is the Black Market Peso Exchange (BMPE), which began in the 1980s as a mechanism for Colombian drug traffickers to swap dirty US dollars for clean Colombian pesos. In such cases, a third-party company would purchase trade commodities, like cigarettes, with dirty US narco-dollars that Colombian drug traffickers would provide, while the profits of the cigarettes, which were clean Colombian pesos, would go to the drug traffickers. According to a 2004 DEA estimate, as much as \$5 billion worth of drug proceeds are laundered through the BMPE per year.”⁴⁷ Watching the flow of money provides intelligence on illicit activities, connections to corrupt officials and other illicit organizations, and allows for the government seizing of assets. Colombian as well as Mexican law enforcement agencies have used these tactics to great success. Increased cooperation with other nations and international organizations would allow the Mexican government to reach cartel assets being laundered in other nations and allow partner nations to arrest conspirators operating within their borders.

Much like a cornered animal, organizations will lash out in an attempt to defend themselves. Colombia and Mexico have seen an initial surge in violence after government forces have attempted to reestablish sovereignty. Rollins and Wyler point out that “effective law enforcement

⁴⁷ Rollins and Wyler, *International Terrorism and Transnational Crime: Security Threats, U.S. Policy, and Considerations for Congress*, 12.

pressure against the Medellín...caused the group to launch a wave of violence against both Colombian officials and civilians. In total, the Medellín's violent attacks resulted in the death of more than 500 Colombian police, 40 judges, and the explosion of a commercial airliner with almost 200 civilians on board."⁴⁸ If Mexican officials begin to press hard on the cartels, they should be prepared for a violent retaliation.

Part of the government's preparations should be a public relations campaign to rally support for antinarcotics efforts and to make the case for certain controversial actions. In Colombia, Dr Marks contends, "insurgent tactical assaults were given strategic consequence with spin. This spin came not from FARC, but from the president's political enemies and from the media's often dubious reporting. The result was that FARC's minor tactics, inconsequential in and of themselves, stood a chance of generating strategic reversal for the state."⁴⁹ Colombian officials realized that the FARC was winning the messaging battle with their campaign of fear. As long as the people believed the government could not protect them from the FARC, the government could not count on the people's support. Colombia's concerted effort to shape the message paid off. Dr Marks points out that "loss of leaders led to surrenders, which psychological warfare units exploited with a variety of innovative programs, from rallies to radio broadcasts...Business picked up; the economy improved; kidnappings and murders dropped substantially."⁵⁰ Mexico is currently losing the messaging battle with the cartels. Mexican public relations efforts are not coordinated consistently, and are reactionary. Utilizing the Colombian model of actively shaping the message may substantially change public perception of cartel power and break the people out of their mental prisons.

⁴⁸ Rollins and Wyler, *International Terrorism and Transnational Crime: Security Threats, U.S. Policy, and Considerations for Congress*, 32.

⁴⁹ Marks, "A Model Counterinsurgency: Uribe's Colombia (2002-2006) vs FARC," 50.

⁵⁰ Marks, "A Model Counterinsurgency: Uribe's Colombia (2002-2006) Vs FARC," 48.

The Mexican military is in a similar state to the Colombian military of the 1980s and 1990s. It took over a decade and the substantial efforts of Colombian Presidents Pastrana and Uribe to reform their military into a professional, joint, and integrated force. The wisdom of their vision cannot be overstated. The results were so profound that other Colombian agencies followed the example set by the military. Dr Marks states that “integration extended beyond the military. Other government agencies were directed to participate. The state’s involvement brought a new closeness to integrated efforts that hitherto had normally depended upon interpersonal relations in areas of operation. In particular, law enforcement and judicial authorities became an important part of operations. This provided government forces with enhanced flexibility, because the police and officials could engage in actions not legally devolved to the armed forces (e.g., the right to search).”⁵¹ Mexico will not professionalize and integrate their military overnight but with sustained effort it is possible to see results similar to those experienced in Colombia.

On Second Look

Mexico is not Colombia. There are vast differences in geography, economics, culture, and countless other factors. Sun Tzu said that “water shapes its course according to the nature of the ground over which it flows; the soldier works out his victory in relation to the foe whom he is facing. Therefore, just as water retains no constant shape, so in warfare there are no constant conditions. He who can modify his tactics in relation to his opponent and thereby succeed in winning, may be called a heaven-born captain.”⁵² Anyone attempting to develop a counterinsurgency strategy cannot simply copy PLAN COLOMBIA and expect it to work in Mexico. Mexican cartels are not the FARC or ELN. their motivations are different. The FARC has a declared political intent

⁵¹ Marks, “A Model Counterinsurgency: Uribe’s Colombia (2002-2006) Vs FARC,” 49.

⁵² Sunzi, *The Illustrated Art of War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 153.

and could be integrated into the political process much like the UK and Sinn Féin (the political wing of the Irish Republican Army) came to an agreement during the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. Dr Marks points out that “in contrast, negotiations with FARC have not proved successful, so only armed action by the state remains. The desired goal is reincorporation of FARC into the political process, but it is recognized that incentive must be created by armed action.”⁵³ This dynamic does not exist in Mexico, there is little to no prospect of integrating criminal organizations into the legitimate political process.

It has been mentioned several times already but it bears repeating, definitions matter. Colombia has defined their conflict as a counterinsurgency and the US largely defines the problem in the same way. This allows for a specific type of aid to flow from the US and a full military response from the Colombian government. Dr Marks stated that “in some US political and media circles, the conflict is still labeled counter-narcotics, or counter-terrorism, or counterinsurgency, or something else. It is all of these things and must be approached in a unified manner. This is precisely what the Colombians have been fighting to achieve, and they have made dramatic strides, although these have come at considerable political and personal cost for key players such as President Uribe.”⁵⁴ Mexico is still defining the problem as organized crime. Until this changes, the type of aid the US provides and the actions of the Mexican government will be limited to a law enforcement solutions, which have been applied for the last fourteen years and are largely regarded as an abject failure.

Part of this failure stems from lack of public support in Mexico for law enforcement and military personnel. This is not the case in Colombia. The Colombian military is largely free of corruption and has few documented human rights abuses despite what the propaganda

⁵³ Marks, “A Model Counterinsurgency: Uribe’s Colombia (2002-2006) vs FARC,” 51.

⁵⁴ Marks, “A Model Counterinsurgency: Uribe’s Colombia (2002-2006) Vs FARC,” 56.

generated by the FARC and ELN have led some to believe. Dr Marks states “the military, under its reform-minded leadership, has consistently emerged in Colombian polls as one of the most respected institutions in the country, with favorable numbers reaching near the 80th percentile.”⁵⁵ This dynamic does not exist in Mexico where public trust and respect of police and military forces is abysmally low. Rampant corruption in Mexican security forces means that more often than not the forces that are supposed to protect the populace are in fact the problem. As pointed out earlier the reaction of the people has been to form local militias which have resorted to illegally arming themselves in order to survive.

Analysis

**Victory is reserved for those who are willing to pay its price.
– Sun Tzu**

PLAN COLOMBIA is by most accounts a resounding success story of a nation regaining its sovereignty by defining the threat from the FARC for what it was, an insurgency. Drugs were merely the source of cash that financed the insurgency. With this established, the Colombian government reached out to the US for assistance. Together they developed a three phase counterinsurgency strategy.

The first of this strategy required Colombia to make a significant investment in both money and intellectual capital to develop a professional and integrated force structure. This new force structure allowed the Colombians to recruit, develop, and maintain high skill personnel and niche specialties that the FARC could not match. The US provided funding, technical support, training, specialized equipment, and intelligence. The Colombians built a military and national police force that was seen as elite, largely free from corruption, and trusted by the population.

⁵⁵ Marks, “A Model Counterinsurgency: Uribe’s Colombia (2002-2006) Vs FARC,” 54.

The second step of Colombia's strategy saw the military push deep into FARC and ELN held territory to hunt down paramilitary units to reestablish security and basic rule of law for the rural population. Colombian forces took great care to build trust with the population and to ensure villagers that they would not abandon them to FARC and ELN retribution. It was discriminate force that drove the FARC to its knees and rebuilt the people's faith in their government's ability to provide security.

The third step of the counterinsurgency campaign saw the Colombian government call for reconciliation and offer alternatives to former insurgent fighters. It is important to note that the Colombian government called for negotiations from a position of strength. The government took great care to control the narrative of two choices, reconciliation and hope for legal employment or destruction. Some point out that the Colombian government has not kept its part of the agreement to provide employment opportunities and blame this for the resurgence of local criminal activity. While this may be so, it should be noted that low level criminal activity is preferable to open insurgency and that the FARC and ELN paid their fighters far more than the government ever offered them. The reality is that the FARC and ELN fighters laid down their weapons because they preferred their chances in the Colombian justice system to their odds of surviving contact with Colombian Rangers in the jungle.

There are many lessons from PLAN COLOMBIA that may be applicable to Mexico's situation. However, there are significant differences between Mexico and Colombia that must be studied and addressed. Many questions arise when dealing with such a complex issue. What does a stabilized Mexico look like? What courses of action are available to the US? What US policy changes are recommended and how will they be financed in the middle of an economic downturn? These are the questions that the author will attempt to answer next.

Chapter 5

Conclusions

**Everybody has a plan until they get punched in the face.
– Mike Tyson**

This section provides an analysis of the proceeding chapters. It begins by describing some of the criteria that must be met before Mexico can be considered stabilized and provide some basic metrics that can be used to measure progress towards these goals. Next, it details some possible courses of action for consideration by US policy makers to assist the Mexican government in reestablishing rule of law. Finally, the author will advocate for specific US policy changes and propose adjustments to funding for US aid to Mexico.

There was no single catastrophic event that drove Mexico to the point where it could no longer govern vast sections of its territory. Mexico's façade in the 1990s was that of an up and coming liberal democracy. Its foundation, however, was unstable and this was clearly visible to those looking for key indicators. Dr Schultz, professor of international politics at the Fletcher School, Tufts University, contends:

The Failed State Index provides an analytic lens through which to gain an understanding of the conditions and sources of instability in weak, failing, and failed states...Weak democracies may aspire to become liberal democracies, ones that 'protect the civil rights and political liberties of their citizens and have a high degree of the rule of law. Some do not uphold high standards of the rule of law or apply it inconsistently for only a portion of their populations. Others fail to protect civil liberties and therefore do not enjoy the full consent of all sectors of their populations.' As a result, they may be challenged by armed groups who undermine fundamental security and even jeopardize the continued existence of the regime. Examples include Colombia, Mexico, Lebanon, and the Philippines.¹

¹ Richard Schultz, *Security Force Assistance and Security Sector Reform*, Joint Special Operations University (MacDill AFB, FL: Joint Special Operations University, September 2013), 8–11.

Corruption, incompetence, and hubris by those in power in Mexico allowed small problems to be ignored, fester, and grow to an unmanageable point. Dr Farwell states that “until the early 1990s, the drug business in Mexico was relatively peaceful. US citizens suffered, but the situation worked well for Mexicans. Second, neither side has a strategy for managing or prevailing in this war—a problem complicated by extreme Mexican sensitivity that the United States will intrude upon its sovereignty. Success requires resolving these challenges.”²

Ungoverned Space

The Failed State Index, Ungoverned Areas Project (Lamb Report), and the Rand Corporation’s Ungoverned Territories project point out that the number one indicator that a state will develop problems with illicit or insurgent activity is lack of sufficient government control of territory. These activities, while most acute locally, will have international impact. Dr Schultz contends “The Failed State Index...2011 appraisal finds, the ‘pressures on one fragile state can have serious repercussions not only for that state itself and its people, but also for its neighbors and other states halfway across the globe.’ This is particularly the case when a weak state’s performance gaps, political tensions, and dysfunctional policies deteriorate into internal conflict and violence. This violence can spill over and spread outside the weak state, especially if internal conflict fosters transnational security threats that bring instability to the region in which it is located and beyond. The Failed State Index is not alone in such an assessment. Rather, it is illustrative of a considerable amount of research and analysis over the last decade that has resulted in similar findings.”³

While ungoverned space is the environment which fosters insurgency or illicit activity, the true goal is security for the population. The case study of PLAN COLOMBIA shows clearly that the insurgency

² Farwell and Arakelian, “War on Our Doorstep Not a Mere Crime Problem,” 48.

³ Schultz, *Security Force Assistance and Security Sector Reform*, 13.

inspired by the FARC and ELN was spreading until the Colombian government moved in, reclaimed, and held territory militarily. If the people cannot depend upon the government to protect them from cartels then they will do what they have to in order to survive. Of course government control of territory varies. Dr Schultz says that “within these states, the Rand study identified three categories or subtypes of ungoverned territory—abdicated, incomplete, and contested—based on the extent to which state control was receding. The Lamb Report proposed a five category typology—ungoverned, under-governed, misgoverned, contested, and exploitable areas.”⁴ The US should monitor ungoverned spaces to see if they are growing, shrinking, or moving. This will allow the US to predict where threats will emerge from, direct resources, and observe Mexican efforts.

Mexico must regain control of its territory and establish security for the Mexican people. Colombia started this process by attacking the FARC’s ability to fund its operations. Dr Schultz states that ‘for abdicated, under-governed, or contested territory to be conducive as a safe-haven requires that it provide access to financial resources either from internal or external sources. All armed groups need funds to support their activities. Consequently, if an area contains a high value commodity like drugs, oil, precious stones, or other mineral resources that the armed group can exploit, then that territory will be seen as conducive for establishing a base. In such situations, an illicit actor directly exploits the indigenous commodity by controlling its export distribution.”⁵ No government can control one hundred percent of its territory one hundred percent of the time. By identifying key areas where commodities or access points are located, governments can focus limited ISR and strike assets for rapid interdiction missions or may choose to hold permanently these areas.

⁴ Schultz, *Security Force Assistance and Security Sector Reform*, 18.

⁵ Schultz, *Security Force Assistance and Security Sector Reform*, 25.

Corruption

**When you speak the truth, have one foot in the stirrup.
– Old West Adage**

Mexico, as noted earlier, has an epidemic of corruption. It has effected every facet of the society. People don't trust government officials for fear that they are on the pay roles of the cartels, judge's rulings follow the money, US aid is bled off into various coffers, and cartels are tipped off to law enforcement operations. Cartels have gained access to US classified and law enforcement sensitive documents exposing intelligence sources, informants, and tactics. Cartels have used this information to ambush and kill American law enforcement personnel. Dr Farwell calls for the US to "abrogate the Brownsville Agreement, which former attorney general Janet Reno entered into in 1998. This agreement lacked foresight in that it compelled the United States to notify the Mexican government of undercover operations in Mexico. That agreement handicapped our law enforcement agencies on any number of fronts without Mexican compromise."⁶

If cartels can kill US agents and get away with it, what hope does the average Mexican have that he can go to the authorities? Even the Mexican army has deep ties to Los Zetas. Dr Farwell states that "except for its marines, who have proven relatively effective, Mexico's military should be employed with restraint...Mexico's experience in using its military has produced mixed results, while alienating many Mexicans."⁷ Mexican security forces must regain the trust of the populace. The fact remains that rural communities have been abandoned time and again by government forces. It will take a significant amount of time and effort to crack the wall of silence. Isacson and Poe wrote that "even without the added element of a guerrilla insurgency, overcoming distrust is one of the

⁶ Farwell and Arakelian, "War on Our Doorstep Not a Mere Crime Problem," 50.

⁷ Farwell and Arakelian, "War on Our Doorstep Not a Mere Crime Problem," 49.

most difficult troubles faced when establishing a government presence where none has existed.”⁸

The US should encourage and monitor Mexican anticorruption efforts. It is difficult to measure accurately public trust of government agencies and officials. However, it is easy to watch the number of corruption charges filed, the number of convictions, and the severity of sentencing. If Mexico is serious about dealing with the cartels it must get a handle on corruption. Getting serious means having anticorruption laws with real teeth. Unfortunately, it appears that for the time being Mexican officials are serious about making money at the expense of their constituent’s safety and welfare.

Violence

People sleep peaceably in their beds at night only because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf. – George Orwell

The cartels maintain their grip on the population through fear. They instill fear through horrific public displays of violence. These are terrorist tactics with the goal of cowing the population into compliance. The people need a police force and a military that will fight the evil lurking in the community. Dr Farwell suggests that the Mexican government needs to “approach the situation as a low-intensity conflict against insurgents who are both criminals and terrorists—and treat them as terrorists. Make no settlement with the cartels. They are in the business in which they want to be. The cartels are an evil, and evil cannot be defeated. It must be eradicated.”⁹

Violence is the most visible indication of instability. Counterintuitive as it may seem, Mexico may have to weather a period of increased violence in order to establish long term stability. As pointed out earlier, if the Mexican government becomes more aggressive in their

⁸ Isacson and Poe, “After Plan Colombia Evaluating ‘Integrated Action,’ the Next Phase of U.S. Assistance,” 17.

⁹ Farwell and Arakelian, “War on Our Doorstep Not a Mere Crime Problem,” 48.

attempts to fight the cartels we should expect a spike in violence as the cartels fight back. The cartels will attempt to make the costs too high for the government to continue on its course. The retaliatory strikes will most likely be visually spectacular to maximize the impact of the media coverage. Political leaders must anticipate this and be prepared to counter the spin with a logical and consistent message.

The US can observe the number and intensity of law enforcement and military operations designed to root out cartels. This will serve as an indication of commitment of the Mexican government towards reestablishing security. To measure the effectiveness of the operations the US should look for longer term reductions in the number of rapes, kidnappings, murders, and disappearances. After an initial spike in retaliatory violence, the US should expect to see a marked drop in the number of attacks and ambushes on government security forces if those forces are tactically and operationally effective. As PLAN COLOMBIA showed, the FARC soon learned that standing and fighting with Colombian Rangers and Federal Police was tantamount to suicide. Effective police forces are very rarely openly challenged, this is very telling about the nature of the current situation in Mexico. In Mexico the police are attacked openly and have retreated from entire regions. In stable nations criminals can only prey on the weak and run from the police.

Courses of Action for Consideration

The problems in Mexico are real and they will not be going away anytime soon. People are suffering and dying. Drugs, violence, and instability have already crossed over to the US side of the border. Dr Schultz contends that “it is improbable that Washington will be able to avoid being drawn into the security challenges that weak states and armed groups will generate because they will affect those interests and

policies.”¹⁰ American policy makers have a wide range of options from which to choose. This section will examine three possible courses of action for consideration.

Some noted scholars such as Dr. Farwell have called for a return to the Merida Initiative. He states that it failed because “too much money went to US contractors and too little to Mexicans who could make a difference. Mexico lacks the resources needed to implement properly the institutional and social reforms needed to win this war. This is a long-term challenge, but success requires achieving social justice in Mexico. We can do more to help and we must.”¹¹ This security assistance heavy program has been tried before and does not currently have the support of the Obama administration or the bipartisan support in the Congress to have a realistic chance for being implemented. Dr Chalk stated that “another prominent difficulty will be how to manage and ‘sell’ this assistance at a time when US-Mexico relations are being strained over the issue of border control and associated fears of a ‘flood’ of illegal immigrants and narcotics-related violence being unleashed into the US.”¹² Dr Farwell offers that too much funding went to American contractors and this may be the case. However, many contend that the money that did reach Mexican officials was spent improperly or was lost to corruption. Dr Farwell even acknowledged this when he wrote that “critics worry the cartels will try to subvert and corrupt such a force. Be assured they will make that effort. But Mexico and the United States must work cooperatively to ensure an effective force is recruited, trained, and retained. Though not an easy task, it should not deter us.”¹³ If a revived Merida Initiative is to have any hope of being successful the US must hold Mexico accountable for how aid is used, demand results, and verify compliance.

¹⁰ Schultz, *Security Force Assistance and Security Sector Reform*, 44.

¹¹ Farwell and Arakelian, “War on Our Doorstep Not a Mere Crime Problem,” 50.

¹² Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, 68.

¹³ Farwell and Arakelian, “War on Our Doorstep Not a Mere Crime Problem,” 48–49.

A second course of action has the US playing a more active or interventionist role. Dr Schultz claims that “it will be much more cost effective for the U.S. to address these challenges, as Secretary Gates proposed, by developing an ‘early intervention’ strategy. By doing so, Washington can assist those weak states that are located in key areas where it has interests at stake to ‘prevent festering problems from turning into crises that require costly and controversial direct military intervention.’”¹⁴ This course of action is much closer to PLAN COLOMBIA than to the Merida Initiative, because of the much more active role of US forces and the deep level of integration that would be required. US forces would control the assets and only provide the Mexican government assistance with ISR, training, and in limited instances Special Forces teams to conduct raids on high value targets. Dr. Chalk supports this strategy saying “the U.S. experience in Colombia, for instance, has demonstrated the value of relatively inexpensive aerial surveillance and monitoring platforms equipped with a broad array of electronic sensors as a means of quickly and efficiently disseminating actionable intelligence to on ground rapid-response units.”¹⁵ This course of action would find a greater level of support in the US from the Obama administration and arguably the Congress as well. Dr Schultz stated that “Secretary Gates...believed this was necessary because the Obama administration was moving away from major interventions like those that had taken place in Afghanistan and Iraq following 9/11. As a substitute, he proposed the U.S. employ ‘indirect approaches—primarily through building the institutional capacity of partner governments and their security forces—to prevent festering problems from turning into crises that require costly and controversial direct military intervention.’” This approach, the secretary concluded, ‘is arguably as important as, if

¹⁴ Schultz, *Security Force Assistance and Security Sector Reform*, 44.

¹⁵ Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, 68.

not more so than the fighting the United States does itself.”¹⁶

Unfortunately, the Mexican government is very suspicious of US motives and jealously guards its sovereignty against US hegemony. Convincing the Mexican government to accept any direct US intervention is unlikely. Dr Chalk states that “the key challenge...will be how to provide enhanced...capabilities to the Mexican government, and specifically the armed forces, while respecting and being sensitive to the latter’s sense of national sovereignty.”¹⁷

The third course of action would be to discontinue aid to Mexico until they have reached a point where they are willing to accept terms and conditions set by the US. Funds that have previously been used for aid to Mexico could be used to fight the demand for drugs in the US. This course of action aligns with the Obama administrations stated goals to two key ways. First, it keeps the US out of messy foreign entanglements, reduces cost and presents a “light footprint.”¹⁸ Second, it meets the goal of focusing resources on problems on the US side of the border. While Dr Schultz does not support this course of action he states that the US must take steps to “impede the spillover of violence and instability into surrounding regions through the flow of refugees, transport of weapons and illicit goods, and cross border movement of various armed groups. It is a reality that intrastate conflict is rarely confined within the borders of the country where it begins.”¹⁹ By controlling the American side of the border the US can stop a great majority of the elements listed by Dr Schultz without relying on the Mexican government. The US can unilaterally move to choke off the cartels funding not by poisoning their crops but by attacking their bank accounts. Dr Farwell suggests that the US should “seize and restrict access to cartel finances. This is pivotal since their wealth gives them

¹⁶ Schultz, *Security Force Assistance and Security Sector Reform*, 65.

¹⁷ Chalk, *Latin American Drug Trade*, 68.

¹⁸ Schultz, *Security Force Assistance and Security Sector Reform*, 45.

¹⁹ Schultz, *Security Force Assistance and Security Sector Reform*, 45.

exceptional power that must be broken. One challenge the United States confronts is the refusal of the Treasury Department to deal with the reality of the drug war—or counterterrorism—as requiring a combination of law enforcement and special operations. The Washington Post reports a proposal by the White House to target cartel assets was declined by Treasury. That mistake must be rectified.”²⁰ This course of action is likely to face stiff resistance from the Mexican government and others who have become dependent on this aid. Taking away foreign aid is always a contentious issue that will undoubtedly be leveraged for political gain. Therefore any administration choosing this course of action must plan for this eventuality and effectively control the messaging.

Advocacy and Funding Proposal

If you screw things up in tennis, it's 15-love. If you screw up in boxing, it's your ass. – Randall "Tex" Cobb

Colombia acknowledged their insurgency, graciously accepted US assistance, and took the necessary steps to crush the cartels; FARC and ELN. Mexico refuses to come to terms with the fact that they have multiple private armies controlling vast sections of their territory. As we have seen, many Mexican citizens have given up on waiting for the government to help them and have begun forming self-defense militias. The government has reluctantly accepted the presence of the militias because they have been unable to stop the cartels and would likely face an open revolt if they fired on citizens trying to protect their families. Mexico is certainly fighting a commercialist insurgency and may well be on the verge of civil war. Law enforcement will not be sufficient to address the severity of the situation as it stands.

No amount of US financial aid, equipment, or training can make up for a failed Mexican strategy. Continuing down the path of the Merida

²⁰ Farwell and Arakelian, “War on Our Doorstep Not a Mere Crime Problem,” 48.

Initiative again without substantial changes within the Mexican government's policies and actions is ludicrous and is, simply stated, throwing good money after a bad investment. In the business world this is called sunk costs. The Mexican government has been crystal clear in expressing its concerns about US overreach into their territory and internal affairs. It is unreasonable to think that the current US and international political environment will support an American intervention in Mexico without their consent. This is, of course, barring a massive attack on the US homeland (similar in scale to the attacks of September 11th, 2001) that could be attributed to groups staging from Mexico.

Therefore, the US should expand its policy of refocusing resources on the American side of the border. There are four actions that the US can address unilaterally, rapidly, and by the executive branch alone who controls both the Department of Defense and Department of Justice. First, the US should consider realigning the GCC structures of NORTCOM and SOUTHCOM into a single GCC that is focused on threats in the western hemisphere. Without this organizational change Dr Marks contends that "Latin America is the forgotten theater, Southern Command the forgotten command, and Colombia our forgotten but closest, most reliable ally."²¹ A new organization focused on the western hemisphere would tear down arbitrary barriers and allow established partnerships to be leveraged in new and creative ways. Dr Farwell points out that "a hemispheric approach must be reviewed by looking beyond Mexico to our regional neighbors. The drug war threatens Canada as well as Central and South America. Coordinate with Canadian SOF in providing training to Central and South American militaries for counternarcotics and to the military in Guatemala, El Salvador,

²¹ Marks, "A Model Counterinsurgency: Uribe's Colombia (2002-2006) vs FARC," 56.

Honduras, and other Latin allies through SOF assistance to help them develop special-mission capabilities for defeating drug traffickers.”²²

Second, the executive branch needs to force the establishment of integrated interagency organizations to leverage the various agency skill sets, authorities, and assets. Much like the separate military branches had to be forced to operate jointly in order to fully exploit synergy of their individual strengths, the expertise and authorities needed to combat the narcotics trade already exist with the various agencies. As stated earlier, the fleeting nature of smuggling operations requires a smoothly coordinated, almost automatic response. JIATF-S could be used as a template for others to follow.

Third, the US must recognize that the problem has escalated beyond severe criminal activity. Definitions matter when attempting to garner public support for an expanded campaign, justifying additional funding, and for altering expectations of what measures can or should be taken when addressing the problem. Current efforts are not working and denial is not an effective strategy. US leadership must accurately diagnose the nature of the problem regardless of Mexican nomenclature. Dr Farwell contends that the “US must move beyond defeatist rhetoric suggesting the drug war can only be managed, not won. It can and must be won. But that requires viewing it realistically and taking significant action against the cartels...Mexico lies on our doorstep, and much of what affects its vital interests is entwined with vital US interests. Recognizing that reality is the beginning, and it is time to get moving.”²³ The President holds the “bully pulpit” which significantly affects the tone and direction of US policy discussion. How he defines an issue matters.

Fourth, the Department of Justice and the Department of the Treasury, as Dr Farwell and others suggest, should immediately begin seizing cartel assets. Choking off funding reduces their ability to project

²² Farwell and Arakelian, “War on Our Doorstep Not a Mere Crime Problem,” 50–51.

²³ Farwell and Arakelian, “War on Our Doorstep Not a Mere Crime Problem,” 50–51.

power through corruption, weapons purchases, and reducing their prestige. Additionally, this may disrupt cartel relationships with international terror networks.²⁴ Dr Farwell suggests that “if the US seized such assets, it should share them with Mexico as an incentive to encourage Mexican cooperation.”²⁵ Unfortunately, with the high levels of corruption in Mexico much of this money would simply find its way back into cartel hands. A better solution would be to redirect this money to US law enforcement efforts.

Congressional Action

Aside from the executive actions listed above, the US Congress should exercise power over the purse strings. Future US foreign aid to Mexico should be bound to verifiable progress towards regaining control of the situation. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, it is possible to monitor Mexican efforts by focusing on reductions in the amount and type of ungoverned space, level of corruption, and violence. Dr Farwell states that the “US must persuade Nieto of the value of US assistance, particularly intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance. Nieto may eschew such help, but we must persuade him to reverse course and make clear that vital US interests are at stake—and we will act accordingly.”²⁶ Removing US funding sends a clear signal that business as usual is no longer acceptable and pressure will mount for Mexican authorities to change course. We may have already reached a point where the Mexican people are ready to demand changes from their political leadership. Dr Schultz states that “a range of political, religious, and cultural differences exist in fragile states that, as the Arab Spring demonstrated, can with little early warning result in serious violent and nonviolent challenges to state authority. In such situations, human agency can trump the political power and institutions of regimes that

²⁴ Farwell and Arakelian, “War on Our Doorstep Not a Mere Crime Problem,” 48.

²⁵ Farwell and Arakelian, “War on Our Doorstep Not a Mere Crime Problem,” 48.

²⁶ Farwell and Arakelian, “War on Our Doorstep Not a Mere Crime Problem,” 49.

have been considered impervious to such challenges.”²⁷ The rise of the local self-defense militias indicate that severe upheaval may be just around the corner in Mexico.

Conclusion

New eras don't come about because of swords, they're created by the people who wield them. – Nobuhiro Watsuki

While you were reading this thesis there were real people being tortured, raped, and murdered in Mexico at the hands of various cartels, local gangs, and paramilitary organizations who profit from the international drug trade. Recreational drug users claim that their habits don't hurt anyone. The author contends that they should visit Ciudad Juárez where they can see firsthand what their money is financing. The situation is grim. However, this is not the first time armed men have terrorized civilians for profit. The Colombians faced this same type of threat in the FARC and ELN. Mexico can defeat the cartels and restore rule of law to their people.

First, Mexico must correctly define its problem before it will ever be able to develop an effective strategy. There is a commercialist insurgency currently under way in Mexico. The situation has progressed far beyond something that can be addressed with a law enforcement solution. This will take a concerted effort to craft a convincing and consistent message. A significant amount of political capital must be spent to redefine the way forward. Dr Farwell states that “Mexican leadership must persuade its population, especially its elites (who arguably have too often helped, not fought, the cartels), middle class, unions, and civil society organizations to support the fight against the cartels—stop kidnapping, extortion, robbery, human trafficking, arms smuggling, and drug trafficking. Calderon failed to lay a solid political foundation for waging the war. Success requires persuading Mexicans their own lives depend

²⁷ Schultz, *Security Force Assistance and Security Sector Reform*, 67.

on defeating the cartels. The challenge is difficult, but Nieto must avoid repeating Calderon's mistakes."²⁸

Second, Mexico must regain control of its territory and establish security for the Mexican people. Without doing this the cartels will be able to maintain its grip on the population. Once an area has been taken back the Mexican security forces must work diligently to regain the trust of the populace, then basic services can be reestablished and normalcy can return to a region. PLAN COLOMBIA provides a case study for lessons learned and basic template for implementation of a counterinsurgency strategy. The Colombians knew money was a center of gravity. The cartels were in business to make money. The FARC and ELN needed money to finance their political goals. Corruption relies on payments for looking the other way. By attacking the drug crops PLAN COLOMBIA choked the life out of the cartels and the insurgents. Dr Farwell states that "Mexico could deplete cartel bank accounts and seize assets. The United States could provide intelligence and technical support to help locate such assets then defer to Mexico for action."²⁹

Summary of Discoveries

Through the research for this thesis the author was constantly shocked by the level of violence and the depravity that is taking place in Mexico to sustain the drug trade. Despite this, the majority of Americans are unaware of what is going on next door. The American population continues to question why so many Mexican nationals are in the US illegally. The more appropriate question might be: why would someone not flee to the safety and prosperity of the US if they had the opportunity? This violence has spilled over in limited ways into the US and is a growing threat because of our porous border with Mexico, cartel connections to extremist organizations, and incredibly effective cartel smuggling operations. In Mexico, the effects of long term exposure to

²⁸ Farwell and Arakelian, "War on Our Doorstep Not a Mere Crime Problem," 49.

²⁹ Farwell and Arakelian, "War on Our Doorstep Not a Mere Crime Problem," 48.

violence by children has manifested itself in a generation who sees brutality as normal. Cartel strongmen or caudillos have become idols to boys. Popular music and stories romanticize the exploits of these paramilitary units and their lifestyle. It is eerily similar to Middle Eastern children who, being exposed to perpetual violence, begin to idolize suicide bombers. Unfortunately, changing the views of children who have been so deeply imprinted by traumatic events will require significant time and effort.

Corruption pervades every facet of life in Mexico. This struck the author as being the root problem facing the nation. Until the military, police, justice system, and politicians provide rule of law to the population they cannot reestablish trust. This lack of basic security and distrust of the government has led to citizens illegally taking up arms. Self-governance by small armed factions is the model of failed states such as the warlords of Somalia and tribal leaders of Afghanistan, not of a healthy, modern democracy. However, when the people do not trust the authorities to protect their families from the brutalization of cartel paramilitary units, we should expect them to fight back. The author believes the American public would not long suffer such treatment before they took up arms in a similar manner. Thankfully, Americans do not find themselves having to make such a difficult decision because our military and law enforcement agencies are largely free from corruption.

Changing US policy and erratic funding make implementation of a strategy difficult. Aside from partisan politics which have caused funding to be held up, policy makers cannot even agree on a definition of what is going on in Mexico. It is an impossible task to come up with a solution for a problem if you are unable to articulate what the problem is. Because of this, US policy and aid is unfocused, of short duration, and lacks follow through. Additionally, the cartels have successfully identified and exploited the gaps in the authorities and organizational structures of US agencies tasked to deal with this issue.

Final Thoughts

The US has a role to play in stabilizing Mexico. It is the demand for drugs within America that is financing the violence in Mexico. The US has poured billions of dollars of aid into Mexico and offered assistance in almost every way imaginable. The US has encouraged Mexico to make behavioral and policy changes by providing a myriad of positive incentives. American policy makers should remember that Mexico is an ally, key trading partner, and shares significant historical and cultural ties with the US. With this in mind, it is the author's recommendation that coercive tactics should not be considered when dealing with Mexico. However, the status quo is no longer sustainable. Currently, the Mexican government happily takes the money, insists that no strings be attached to the funds, rebuffs US assistance, and shows no progress. There are concrete steps the US can take to help Mexico, writing a blank check is not one of them. Ultimately, Mexico is responsible for its internal issues.

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